

PUBLIC

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART, ON WEDNESDAY, 3 FEBRUARY 2021.

COVID-19 INQUIRY

Hon. ROGER JAENSCH, MP, MINISTER FOR HUMAN SERVICES.

Mr MICHAEL PERVAN, SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES TASMANIA, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Dean) - Welcome to our inquiry into the COVID-19 pandemic. You are aware this is a public inquiry and is being streamed online as well. I don't think I need to explain the particulars of these inquiries. You are both familiar with them and that privilege applies.

Roger, you haven't made any witness submission and our terms of reference are clear. There are four terms of reference. I will give you an opportunity at this stage to make any presentation to the committee that you would like to make. We can then go into questions if you are comfortable with that position.

Mr JAENSCH - I don't have any opening presentation for you, Mr Chair, but thank you for the welcome. I'm happy to take any questions you or your members have.

CHAIR - We'll go start into questions, members.

Ms FORREST - Minister, I am particularly interested in your department's response with regard to housing matters. You obviously have a few areas. We are seeing, I assume through most of our offices, a lot more demand and concern about access to housing, particularly affordable housing. We are hearing stories of people from the mainland finding out that Tasmania is a much better place than there, buying properties and things like that, which is putting extreme pressure on a lot of our people.

I'd like you to tell me what your understanding is as the minister about the impact COVID-19 has had, particularly with regard to this area and how you are responding.

Mr JAENSCH - Regarding the COVID-19 response itself, one of the things the Government did was to freeze increases on social housing rent. We also made an undertaking to comply with the moratorium on evictions and to ensure that people understood any additional COVID-19-related payments they were receiving were not going to be included in calculations of rent for their social housing. We also made special provision for additional private rental incentive properties - 75, I understand, was the total - so they were added to the pool. We are steadily working through acquiring properties to make available through the private rental incentive program. Allocation was also made to create another 20 properties in the pool of rapid rehousing stock.

One of the things we saw - and Mike might be able to supplement this with some more numbers - is a lot of the churn stopped. There were not as many new applications for the social Housing Register, partly possibly because of those protections in the market, and also the extra

PUBLIC

income that people have had, which has made their existing housing arrangements more secure. Everyone was probably also waiting to see what happened. Through the lockdown periods of the pandemic, there was a general lessening of activity in terms of new applications and movements. We are not yet seeing a return to any stable state just yet. There is a lot of change still happening, which we need to keep monitoring and responding to in terms of the market.

Ms FORREST - A couple of days ago, we saw the ending of some of that rent relief and eviction prohibition. What planning have you been doing? Also JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments will change, if not disappear, fairly soon. What planning have you done to assist that? The demand in my office is increasing, and I am sure that is the case for others too. We have just reached the point of rent relief and so on, but the federal government support is basically coming to an end as well. What preparation have you done? What do you anticipate will be the outcome and the demand? I assume you have done some work around this.

Mr JAENSCH - Most definitely. We have a range of strategies in place for managing our own tenants and the exiting from the controls that have been in place, including resumption of the income-based rent setting processes. There are mechanisms in place to ensure that those do not come as a shock or surprise. There has been communication with our tenants. What you are talking about, though, is also the broader market conditions.

Ms FORREST - That is right, they are going to be on the waiting list.

Mr JAENSCH - That is why during COVID-19 the Government announced a range of measures, including the new \$100 million investment in new social housing across the state. We have now run the expression of interest process for that, and we are in the process of contacting successful proponents for projects. We will be able to announce shortly the sorts of numbers and the locations of properties that we will be able to add to supply, through that program, over the next couple of years.

Ms FORREST - These are properties that need to be built?

Mr JAENSCH - Yes.

Ms FORREST - Okay, so right now -

Mr JAENSCH - But it is amongst the things that we have done. I mentioned some of the others - the private rental incentive, rapid rehousing, the protections for our existing tenants. We are also continuing to drive new supply. In the longer cycle the only thing which is going to reduce pressure is more supply.

Ms FORREST - What is your current waiting list? How many are on it and how long?

Mr JAENSCH - There are around three and a half thousand people on the social Housing Register right now. The average time for priority applicants waiting, I understand, is around 63 weeks - noting that is the average time. It doesn't necessarily reflect the experience of the larger number of applicants who may be housed in a far shorter period. The number, the average, tends to be increased significantly by a smaller number of applicants with very specific needs who may be waiting a good deal longer to be placed because there aren't necessarily suitable properties available for them, and they take time to acquire.

PUBLIC

Ms FORREST - What do you anticipate will be the additional demand? You've two years to build more stock, but people can't move into a plan.

Mr JAENSCH - No, but there is stock coming online every day due to investments that we commenced a year and more ago. There is a constant entry of new stock into the market. I think that with the removal of some of the safeguards, there will be more churn and movement in the market generally, even in social housing, and so more openings will be created in existing housing stock in social housing and the private market as well for people to be moving into. I expect there will be some relief there, in terms of our waitlist and wait times as properties free up that way.

Ms FORREST - Are you able to provide the committee with a list of all public housing properties under your management as well as under Housing Connect and the other providers by region, so we know where they are and the status of them? Are they one-bedroom, two-bedroom, three-bedroom, four-bedroom properties?

It seems to me it's very difficult to get this information. I believe it's relevant to look at what we currently have in our stock, and we could compare it with pre-COVID-19 - like this time last year, which is sort of pre-COVID-19. Then we can look to next year or even the next six months, when we will see the impact of some of these changes or these support measures being withdrawn.

Mr JAENSCH - I refer to the secretary about what information is currently available and in what formats. That might go some way to answering your questions - such as the Report on Government Services - ROGS - tables and so on, that show that breakdown. There is also information providing more breakdown on what the social Housing Register covers - a picture of demand - which we've been following in procurement of new contracts for new housing as well, so we're putting it where demand is. Mike, do you want to comment on that at all?

Mr PERVAN - Thank you, minister. We can provide that detail by local government area.

Ms FORREST - That would be great.

Mr PERVAN - And by bedroom type.

Ms FORREST - Yes.

Mr PERVAN - But it's very much point-in-time, so that the extent to which that will be useful for you is unknown because allocations are made every day. Houses come off the register for a variety of reasons. Occupancy lists, you know. We sell them sometimes. People buy them sometimes so it's not static; it's very much something that's in constant motion.

Ms FORREST - I appreciate it's a point-in-time figure. I would also like a point of time that's comparable to this time last year, if that table could be provided, but also an indication of how many of these are actually vacant. They may be vacant because they're being prepared for a new tenant, I accept that, but just -

Mr JAENSCH - Vacancy is typically below 1 per cent. It's comparable to, and tighter than, the private market. We have a very short turnaround time for properties between

PUBLIC

tenants - I think typically below 1 per cent vacancy across the portfolio of 13 000-odd homes across Tasmania.

Mr O'BYRNE - What's the churn? You talk about it comes off and on it's like a single digit percentage in terms of the churn on and off?

Mr PERVAN - Over the last 12 months it certainly has been. Out of the 13 000-odd properties the minister was talking about, about 80 turn over every month. In the most recent month we have data for, it was 55. Movement generally slowed down over the whole COVID response period.

Ms FORREST - Which month are we talking about?

Mr PERVAN - November - no, September, sorry.

Ms FORREST - So, these are a while back.

Mr PERVAN - Yes.

CHAIR - I had a question on this very point. How many were on the waiting list as at the end of 2019 and what was the number on the list at the end of 2020 to see if there were any changes between those periods of time. There was a question on the geographic areas north and south.

Ms FORREST - Local government has said they will give it to us and I want it by local government.

Mr PERVAN - We could probably provide that on notice.

Mr JAENSCH - We will provide the committee with some numbers for the reporting periods ending closest to the end of 2019-20, also with indicator from the secretary of that time, the numbers in that.

Mr PERVAN - On the face it, it looks like a number that just grows, a bit like hospital waiting lists, but many people come off the list in that 12 months and resign, and new people come on. We will give the data to the committee so you can see what the movement through the waiting list is actually like.

CHAIR - Josh was next on the list, but are there any other questions on this specific point on the housing?

Mr WILLIE - We have talked about permanent housing. Minister, could we go back to the lockdown period? Quite rightly the Government's message was 'Stay home, save lives'. It is pretty hard to stay home if you do not have one. The Government made some emergency brokerage funding available: how many people were housed with that funding?

Mr JAENSCH - You are referring to the uncapped, brokered accommodation which still remains available across the state and was assisted significantly by there being fewer other travellers staying in commercial accommodation. The allocation made in addition to the normal budget allocation of over \$500 000: another \$300 000 was made to top that up and

PUBLIC

there is still capacity to go beyond that, because we stated in our policy that if more were needed, it would be provided.

Mr WILLIE - That is the funding that has been allocated; what has been expended?

Mr JAENSCH - The additional allocation of \$300 000 was fully used. There still remains provision in the normal annual allocation to those services and if more is needed, it will be provided. My department advises we can seek numbers from the Housing Connect partners who manage that stock to give us an indication of how many people took advantage of it.

Mr WILLIE - If you are going to take that on notice, could I ask a couple of other questions in this area that might be able to be taken on notice? After the number of people who were housed with the brokerage funding - the average night's stay in the accommodation: How many people in brokerage accommodation moved into stable accommodation? How many were just moved on? An exact figure for the amount expended - we have just heard there is some still available in that \$500 000 and it would be good to know how much is left.

Mr JAENSCH - That would be acknowledging the brokered accommodation program is available normally as well. We have given it extra capacity so we can give expenditure and it will account for some of the usual as well as the COVID-19-related. You would also be aware that we have been able to put in place the expansion of the Safe Space program, taking it to a 24/7 model in three centres across the state - Hobart, Launceston and Burnie. That was also a response for those who were already sleeping rough with insecure accommodation and giving them a base, which had some COVID-19 supervision and controls applied to it and support for those individuals, particularly to get them into longer term housing and onto a pathway into secure housing of their own. That was another significant investment that will run until June 2022 with the funding we have for those three sites. We were saying, 'Stay home, save lives', for those without homes. That was another thing we did.

Mr WILLIE - As a flow-on from this, the other provision in this space is shelters. Members across the table would have come across constituents who have been turned away from shelters at times. How many people were turned away from emergency shelters during the lockdown period? How many people under the age of 18 were in crisis accommodation? Was PPE provided to workers in those facilities during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

Mr PERVAN - During the lockdown we were operating on advice from the Director of Public Health. It's an interesting issue because it continues to be raised in the context of quarantine hotels. Many people think they needed PPE; they'd seen people wearing PPE on the TV or on their phones. The advice during the lockdown, because we didn't have community transmission, particularly in the south and the north, was that PPE wasn't required in shelters. There was a community request for it. The advice we had from Public Health was that it wasn't clinically necessary and in those days even appropriate.

As the risk has changed over time and as international evidence has accumulated, that advice has been modified at different points during the past 11 months. During those initial days of the lockdown we were getting a lot of requests from shelters, from community sector organisations, from disability services about where they could get PPE. We would give them advice on where they could procure it if they really wanted it as a no-regrets measure - as the

PUBLIC

Commonwealth often calls it - but the advice we had from Public Health was that it wasn't necessary.

Mr WILLIE - This committee has heard about some of the restrictions around PPE during that time and the lack of availability. Was the department concerned that might have been the case? Was that the reasoning behind the guidelines?

Mr PERVAN - No, I am sure, knowing Mark Veitch, that the issue of availability wouldn't enter Mark's mind in giving clinical advice. He would just say it's needed or it's not needed, and he would be very steadfast in providing that advice based on his own knowledge and the deliberations of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee.

As I said, when we did get those requests we referred people to St John Ambulance or other places where they could purchase it. There were concerns raised - I'm sure the committee has heard them - from a number of organisations that when they went to chemist shops, to other places and other normal suppliers, there was none to be had. State Growth brokered a contract through St John Ambulance nationally to be able to provide it for community sector organisations, including group homes, disability services and so on. It was more a communication issue than a problem with availability. We were communicating to the sector as much as we could and referring them on to where they could procure it until such time as we needed to obtain it ourselves - for example, the quarantine processes - then we did.

Mr JAENSCH - Regarding shelters and other crisis accommodation, something to note during the period was the delivery of 18 new single-bed pods at Bethlehem House; 10 new two-bedroom units at Hobart Women's Shelter; seven new family units under the management of the Hobart Women's Shelter; the Waratah, completed and now tenanted; and the Balmoral Motor Inn that we've partnered with Hobart City Mission in securing with another 30-odd rooms there.

In addition to social housing, there's been expansion in that emergency crisis response for rough sleepers, those who are able to sustain or to be accommodated in shelters and those in supported accommodation. That gives us the capacity to receive more people and move them through to find the level of accommodation that they need. It is not all about houses. It will be for the broader population who are turning up on the social Housing Register and their needs - but we have considerably grown our capacity for those in most acute housing stress, and are continuing to do that, particularly with youth-supported accommodation in different parts of the state. We also have projects underway in Launceston, Burnie and Devonport which are growing that capability.

Mr WILLIE - I am happy to hand over to someone else in a minute, Chair, but the minister hasn't answered my question. We all welcome more provision of emergency accommodation, but my question was very specific, minister: how many people were turned away during the emergency lockdown period, and how many people under the age of 18 were housed in crisis accommodation during that time?

Mr JAENSCH - You read a number of figures that you are looking for us to provide on notice. I am happy to provide what information we can in response to those. I think you had three or four.

PUBLIC

Mr WILLIE - Yes, and the ones I just asked then.

Mr JAENSCH - Yes.

CHAIR - Minister, we will put these questions in writing to you. They will come from the committee to the department, through you.

Ms FORREST - To follow up, minister, you have gone around the topic a little bit. With the learnings from COVID-19, you said there was less 'churn' during the period when COVID was at full impact in the state, in terms of our lockdown. But you mentioned also the increased income that people received, predominantly through Commonwealth support, and the other measures taken by the state, by not increasing rent and so on, and the development of 24-hour safe spaces in all regions. These problems existed before COVID-19. There were people sleeping rough all around the state before COVID-19. Of the measures taken to try to assist during that crisis, what do you intend to keep focused on? These problems will not go away completely, if they go away at all. People will slip through the system and end up not being able to access housing once things start to change.

Mr JAENSCH - We will continue to respond to demand and what works. You would have seen, even with the Safe Space program, since it first started in Hobart in December 2019 with Hobart City Mission, just as a night-time option, that it has evolved considerably, and it continues to. Particularly with the addition of the wraparound mental health services and support and the other health services that we are laying on, that whole model is a very expensive model, but it is starting to have some very good results in terms of people moving through who have been able to break the cycle of homelessness.

Ms FORREST - So it is not expensive at all, then.

Mr JAENSCH - It costs a lot, but it is a question of value. I think the value is increasing from it. This has given us a need and an opportunity to experiment with some new models. We will always be following what the demand is and what works. By the time we get to the end of the current commitments to things like the Safe Space program, we will look at what is needed to continue or replace it beyond that, based on what we have learned from it.

Ms FORREST - I know this is a federal government matter, but are you actively lobbying the federal government to consider not cutting back income support - particularly the JobKeeper supplement, I think it is called.

Mr JAENSCH - As a social housing provider, regardless of what happens, or what the policy settings are federally, we need to respond to demand. The heavy lifting is increasing the supply of housing in the long term in the whole market, not just the social housing end of it, and the development of more of those options that are not social housing, but can meet the needs of particular groups, such as those who might be eligible for the HomeShare products, where they might be assisted into a mortgage that is more affordable than renting. I think there is a lot of scope for that to grow. There will be a growing market for that. A review of that whole program and its settings is underway now.

Ms FORREST - The HomeShare program?

PUBLIC

Mr JAENSCH - Yes. I believe it will play a more important role in our toolkit, but our Housing Register, first and foremost, gives us the most accurate picture of need across the state. In coming weeks, as we announce the outcomes of our Community Housing Growth Program, I think you will see a distribution of housing of a type and in locations around the state that responds very specifically to the need expressed by the people who have turned up looking for housing. We will keep doing that.

Ms FORREST - For women with families escaping family violence, we know that when the lockdown was on, it was extremely difficult to leave, and also very dangerous. There was a fall in reporting, for the obvious reason that women cannot report when they are locked down with a perpetrator. Have you, through Housing services, seen an increase in women and families seeking shelter as a result of family violence?

Mr JAENSCH - I know there has been an increase in the capacity to receive survivors, victims or people fleeing family violence through the Rapid Rehousing program, with an additional 20 properties made available through that program. Mike, how do we access numbers on the uptake?

Mr PERVAN - I will take some advice on that, minister.

Mr JAENSCH - As part of the COVID-19 response, \$2.7 million was allocated across the family violence service system; \$1.9 million extra for Safe at Home, for more on-ground workers across the state, including counselling, court support, legal support and police prosecution; \$310 000 to community-based specialist family violence support services to increase their capacity to respond; \$260 000 to increase the Rapid Rehousing pool, with 20 additional properties, as I said; \$100 000 to establish one-off flexible support packages of up to \$6000 to support victim survivors; \$100 000 for a communication project to promote services and key messages to help those impacted by family and sexual violence; and \$5000 for a range of crisis accommodation services to purchase materials for children's entertainment and educational purposes during isolation.

In this data, we do not have a number of increased uptakes. We do? Yes. As you mentioned before, Ruth, the reporting to Tasmania Police remains close to the three-year average. Your point is that there is possibly some masking there, and it will take some time for us to reconcile possible under-reporting during that period, for obvious reasons.

I do not have statistics with me about uptake of those additional services.

Ms FORREST - Are you able to get it?

Mr JAENSCH - Probably. Because there is a range of different supports available, if you are talking about applications for Rapid Rehousing, we might be able to get some numbers on that.

Ms FORREST - That would be helpful, at least, and anything else you do have in terms of uptake.

Mr JAENSCH - Family Violence Rapid Rehousing uptake?

PUBLIC

Ms FORREST - Yes.

Mr JAENSCH - As at 31 December, there were 10 additional cases housed in Rapid Rehousing, above the average.

Ms FORREST - What is the average?

Mr PERVAN - As part of the Rapid Rehousing portfolio, 50 properties are dedicated to people escaping family violence. An additional 10 were taken up during this period to 31 December.

Ms FORREST - That belies the police reporting of incidents.

CHAIR - Do we know where those extra 10 were taken up? Were they across the state or in one area?

Mr PERVAN - We do know but for all sorts of reasons we try to not identify the specific locations. We can give that data to you on a regional basis.

Ms FORREST - On a regional basis would be good because we know the lockdown was hardest in the north-west.

CHAIR - Yes, right.

Mr PERVAN - To add to the minister's comments and to you, Dr Forrest, yes, we did see that drop-off in reporting, probably for the reasons you indicated and, as the minister described it, we saw some masking perhaps of the actual incidents. What we didn't see coming out of the lockdown was a spike, a return to an awful average. What we were expecting was to see a spike, as was witnessed in a couple of other jurisdictions. WA saw a horrific spike in reporting.

CHAIR - Thank you. John, away you go.

Mr TUCKER - Thank you, Chair. Minister, regarding the public infrastructure maintenance stimulus program, could you provide an update on what maintenance the department has been doing, especially considering the amount of money going into housing and the number of houses now under your management?

Mr JAENSCH - Thank you very much, Mr Tucker. Thanks, Mike.

CHAIR - This is specifically COVID-related, obviously, the money that's -

Ms FORREST - Good question, Chair. I just asked them -

Mr JAENSCH - The point was that as part of the social and economic -

CHAIR - Yes, as part of the stimulus program. Right.

Mr JAENSCH - Social and economic support measures in response to the pandemic: \$70 million was provided over 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22 to make sure we are keeping

PUBLIC

those parts of the economy that can keep going as busy as possible, particularly trades and building and those things the Premier memorably described as paintbrush-ready projects that could be commissioned in every postcode and every local government area around the state and keep cash flowing through those towns and those local economies.

Housing is one of the areas where there's the ability to make that happen. Our department was successful in securing over \$5 million for work on Housing Tasmania properties around the state. The expenditure in 2019-20 was \$4 754 710; in 2020-21, so far, \$2 354 354. This was on a range of measures, including cladding and concreting, external lighting and fencing and gutter cleaning and hot water systems et cetera beyond just repairs, but what we need to do to keep our housing stock serviceable and provide good service for the people who live in it.

We have announced programs regarding energy efficiency products for public housing stock, replacing older, inefficient heating systems in all public housing with heat pump, reverse cycle air-conditioner and heater systems where it's possible to do so. There will be properties where that's more difficult because they might be in a complex without external walls and accessibility for the outside part of those systems. In the vast majority of cases we will be able to get that last 25 per cent of properties across the line and install that more efficient heating in them.

Then we will also commence a program for replacing -

CHAIR - On that point - I need to ensure we are on the terms of reference and it is related to COVID-19. We are straying because the packages in relation to the heating and the transfer et cetera were in place well and truly before COVID-19 arrived - it is not just COVID-19 related, is it?

Mr JAENSCH - No, particularly this is a boost to household energy efficiency and bringing in a program of replacing old systems with more efficient ones when they reach the end of their useful life anyway. We had been well advanced into that and it was part of the year on year.

What this has done has put a \$15 million boost into that to get more happening right across the state - both to reduce the costs of living for the people in public housing with older, less efficient systems but also for the stimulus value of having that work happen in local communities right around the state. This was in the last budget and part of a response to economic stimulus packages for COVID-19 recovery.

Ms FORREST - I assume all that work was carried out by local contractors in local regions and there were not any essential workers coming in to complete this work?

Mr JAENSCH - Through our existing procurement system and our panels of providers.

Ms FORREST - That uses local people?

Mr PERVAN - The government policy requires us to buy local.

Ms FORREST - You can get any of those things in this state so no-one brought in to do any of this work?

PUBLIC

Mr JAENSCH - We do not make all the things here, but certainly we are putting them in.

Ms FORREST - You install them?

Mr JAENSCH - Yes.

Mr TUCKER - Has there been an issue with getting a supply of goods for maintenance and that sort of thing with the COVID-19 issues?

Mr JAENSCH - The tradies and builders I speak to are finding there has been too much demand and therefore local stocks have been depleted. There have been disruptions to the supply chains for some, particularly imported products from China and elsewhere over time in the broader market. I do not know if our maintenance programs have been hard hit by this. I might ask the secretary and Pete White whether they have any comment.

Mr PERVAN - It has all gone very well to date on the maintenance side. We are hearing from our developers that some of the materials used for housing construction are starting to become in short supply, because every state and territory has a domestic construction feature in their recovery program. Everyone's buying the same steel work, the same Tek screws - all those sorts of things - and they are buying them in bulk.

Ms FORREST - Whitegoods were in short supply for a period.

Mr PERVAN - Yes. Plumbing fixtures, all of it. There will be some price pressure around that as demand peaks over the next two years. That is something we factor in. It happens from time to time. We are used to it but the maintenance has gone very well.

Mr TUCKER - Has there been an increase in the amount of maintenance required because people have been staying home more in COVID-19 than normal, or not?

Mr JAENSCH - Not that has been reported to me, no.

Mr PERVAN - No, and because they have been having to stay at home, some of them have actually been taking better care of their properties than they otherwise would.

CHAIR - Thanks.

Mr O'BYRNE - Minister, I just want to touch on quarantine hotels and your responsibility in the portfolio.

Could you take us back to early March-late April and talk us through the establishment of what routine and what regime you put in place to manage security. We asked the State Controller in a previous hearing about security in quarantine hotels and he said that was in your department's area. Could you talk us through how you established this and what was the regime and guidelines, please?

Mr JAENSCH - When the State Control Centre and the State Controller decided to establish quarantine hotels at the end of March 2020, as you said, instructions came out for the Department of Communities Tasmania to secure the properties and to organise private security

PUBLIC

firms to be present at those hotels. The initial hotels were engaged on the same day, Monday, 30 March, along with security providers. Providers of security services were required to demonstrate they had all relevant licences and insurances. They are required by state law to only employ licensed security guards. In the national discussion about these matters, there have been different approaches to this in different jurisdictions, particularly associated with the rapid build up of workforce to fulfil these roles.

In Tasmania we have had private security providers engaged by the Department of Communities from existing suppliers with licences, insurance and all licensed guards. In the international quarantine hotels, we also have the involvement of the Australian Defence Force as well as private security staff. In those cases, security is overseen by Tasmania Police, which has the onsite presence, the ADF at the perimeters and entrances, and security company providers working between them. This has served us well. Public Health has provided the protocols regarding infection control and prevention and regimes for donning and doffing of PPE. Training has been provided through the security companies for that and has been effective thus far as well. We have not had -

Ms FORREST - Who provided that training?

Mr JAENSCH - I might pass that to the secretary.

Mr PERVAN - The advice on what was required was provided by Public Health. Training in the use of PPE has come from the TIPCU, the Tasmanian Infection Prevention and Control Unit, which sits between the THS and the Public Health division. It has been one of the things that is unique to this experience - that there is not a centre of excellence or an authority you can go to anywhere in Australia on human quarantine. There are no large quarantine facilities. There are others that are mentioned a lot. Most states don't have much more than a capacity to quarantine individuals, as in one or two people.

Ms FORREST - It is a shame we did not build a big national one.

Mr PERVAN - My point is that the advice on what was required, when it was required, has changed markedly over time, as well as the discipline that has come from observation of where the risks have emerged in other states. The donning and doffing, as the minister has just referred to, is something relatively new, as is segregating areas inside hotels to be hot zones and cold zones. It's been a learning experience nationally; there was not any guidance or example to draw from.

Mr O'BYRNE - Back when the decision was made to establish this regime, was it an open tender or a closed tender? How did you identify which companies would seek access to that work?

Mr PERVAN - I have in front of me, and at the risk of raising Peter White's and Jessemey Stone's blood pressure, I have the actual direction that landed on us on 28 March at 9 p.m., from the State Controller. We had 48 hours to procure the hotels, the catering, the cleaning and the private security. There was no tender, it was direct procurement. I sought advice from the Secretary of Treasury about how to go about that, and from the Crown Solicitor, who, bless him, turned around a letter of engagement that picked up all the legal essentials of a procurement such that we could use that. He turned that around in 24 hours. That, as an example of how the hotels have been operating for the last 11 months, has been about a very

PUBLIC

strong and very valuable collaboration between multiple agencies. It was not a tender, they were direct procurements in accordance with the powers under the Emergency Management Act.

Mr O'BYRNE - After a period of time did you move to a broader open tender? I assume it was all hands on deck in that first 48 hours, but did you move to a more traditional tendering basis or did you roll out with the company or companies that were initially procured?

Mr PERVAN - We started off with companies and we have changed companies over time due to their ability to meet our needs. We haven't tendered any of these services, simply because we haven't had the specifics to go out and tender on, given that from one week to the next we don't know how long this emergency is going to last. For example, last Thursday there was an active discussion, introduced by Dr Veitch, about whether we even needed the hotels anymore because of what was happening nationally, and then on Sunday afternoon the news came out of Western Australia. It looks like communities will be in the hotel business for a little longer. We have not gone to a tender because a tender is about securing the best price, the best value but within a known product, and we just do not know how long we are going to need this product.

Mr O'BYRNE - How many companies did you engage?

Mr PERVAN - Two initially. Over time, we have engaged four.

Mr O'BYRNE - How many security staff have you engaged?

Mr PERVAN - We might need to take that question on notice.

Mr JAENSCH - We do have information on what the staffing requirements are for the properties at their capacity, but it turns on and off over time.

Mr O'BYRNE - They cannot work endless hours, so you will have a range of staffing to cover the shifts.

Mr JAENSCH - The point is also that over the best part of a year, the demand has gone up and down and the requirements for numbers of staff have gone up and down considerably. At any point in time a different number have been employed and they may be the same people who are re-engaged.

Mr O'BYRNE - You would have a total number of individuals, surely, who have been engaged by those companies?

Mr PERVAN - We can seek that information from the companies. Just to follow on from the minister's comments if I may, where the minister is going is that there are times when part of a facility, or indeed an entire facility, may be vacant for a few days.

Mr O'BYRNE - I understand the vagaries of the ebb and flow of staffing levels.

Mr PERVAN - The numbers go up and down quite a lot.

PUBLIC

Mr O'BYRNE - One of the key risk points is entry to a state where people who are being asked to quarantine because they present as a risk, so that is the reason they have been quarantined. I understand that there is ebb and flow in these matters. In terms of the training, did every security guard receive training from infectious diseases people prior to commencing their work?

Mr PERVAN - Yes, there is an induction process that they go through as there is for any other work site for whatever risks may be on that work site.

Mr O'BYRNE - Could you explain what the induction would be for that security guard?

Mr PERVAN - I can't, because I do not have that information with me and it has changed over time. What we can do is get the current information package and regime and provide that by way of information through the minister.

Mr O'BYRNE - You mentioned it has changed. Could you give me an example of how it might have changed over the last six or so months?

Mr PERVAN - Eleven months ago face masks were not required. Now, they are required to wear PPE and to don and doff it. Over time we have had our sites inspected by WorkSafe. On one of the sites in the north, we needed to make some minor changes around perimeter security because of the nature of that site. Otherwise they were found to be compliant with WorkSafe legislation, which has some very heavy requirements around infection control that most people don't know about. The processes of induction have changed over time, and there are many people out there - from guests to hotel staff to members of the public - who are very vigilant in observing people's use of PPE in the quarantine facilities and report it very quickly and it is responded to equally quickly.

CHAIR - Ruth and Josh also have important questions, so one more question from you, David.

Mr O'BYRNE - We have seen globally that there are potential risks because of the nature of the work force in quarantine hotels. It is predominantly low paid, it is casual work, they work at multiple venues and for multiple employers. We have seen in the recent case in Western Australia where someone worked a second job and it was kept from the employer [TBC]. Can you talk us through how you manage that risk?

Mr JAENSCH - The principal means of doing that is an agreement we have established which applies, I believe, to private security staff as well as to hotel staff who are engaged as part of the quarantine program. It provides for additional payments to them as an incentive for them, or as a compensation, for them to modify their life outside their work environment, including not taking another work for other employers.

Mr O'BYRNE - That is not mandatory, is it?

Mr JAENSCH - A declaration is required that on receipt of that payment, they have or will observe those changed behaviour patterns and there is the financial incentive to compensate for any opportunity costs that that involves.

PUBLIC

Mr O'BYRNE - But it is not mandated they don't take other work, is it?

Mr JAENSCH - You cannot legally stop someone from having other work. Instead, we've created an incentive for people to be able to continue doing the work they're doing and receiving a greater payment than they would've had otherwise for that had they been taking other work as well. Mike, do you want to make any other comments on that?

Mr PERVAN - Very quickly, minister. From the outset, from the beginning of April, we developed a contactless model, which is a little different to other jurisdictions. The hotel and security staff don't actually enter a guest traveller's room at all. That is only done after they depart by cleaning staff who are masked and gowned to do the deep clean. Security staff aren't allowed to touch any bags or anything the traveller has touched. We keep them very, very separate, as well as the hotel staff. The check-in is done over the phone and remotely, so one of the ways we mitigate the risk is to make sure that good, standard health service infection controls are observed right through the hotel.

Mr JAENSCH - I'll just confirm that the wage subsidy allowance arrangements applies to hotel staff, security staff, bus drivers and interpreters who have been onsite in the international quarantine hotels, and it is also in place for State Service employees who worked at an international hotel quarantine environment.

Mr O'BYRNE - Beyond that declaration from the security guard, is there a further check? Or is it just the one point of check? Is there an audit?

Mr JAENSCH - There is also an agreement with the employers of those staff. The government or the department contracts with the hotel and with the security firm, and I understand it is a feature with these agreements as well. Mike?

Mr PERVAN - Security staff also get a weekly nose swab. They're all part of the surveillance regime we operate in the health service.

Mr O'BYRNE - Okay; I have more questions about it.

CHAIR - Thanks, David. Ruth, could you be fairly brief, as Josh has some questions?

Ms FORREST - Will there be an expectation, once the vaccine is available in Australia, that people working in these hotels will have to be vaccinated to continue to work in that space?

Mr JAENSCH - I have to ask Mr Pervan: could you comment on that prioritisation about the quarantine staff?

Ms FORREST - If someone is an anti-vaxxer, they would no longer be required to work in those facilities. Will there be a requirement?

Mr JAENSCH - No longer required to work is a probably a fairly gentle way of saying that, yes.

Mr PERVAN - My understanding, although it's really a question for the Health portfolio, is that hotel quarantine and other service workers would be in the second tranche. The first tranche is very much frontline workers and others.

PUBLIC

Ms FORREST - I just go to matters related to child safety, particularly during the periods of lockdown. Many of us probably heard, or perhaps me more so than others, that in the north-west, there was a real challenge in access visits and children in the care of the state being able to access the support and services they need, particularly with regard to education. It's a broad area, and we've only a few minutes left, but could you tell us what was done in that space to support those children both in state care and those at risk?

Mr JAENSCH - A range of payments, incentives and assistance were available both through Communities Tasmania and in conjunction with the Department of Education in terms of young people in out-of-home care and their ability to access online learning through being able to buy bandwidth and devices and data et cetera. That was one aspect. I think the more important innovation that happened, which we've been able to sustain, has been a very close working relationship between the Child Safety Service and the Department of Education.

In normal times an important role is played by schools and teachers in quietly surveilling the kids in their care. They're one of the key sources of information regarding concerns raised with the Child Safety system. One of the things we needed to deal with is that if schools were closed and kids were no longer there, we wouldn't have that passive surveillance of kids who may be at risk or who may be exhibiting signs of neglect or harm.

An arrangement was created on a regional basis where the information held about known at risk or vulnerable children and families was shared between the two departments. Each would have their own means of maintaining contact with those children and families through teaching and through Child Safety visits. There was the ability to make sure there was a sharing of intelligence. If there hadn't been contact, or if concerns were raised through those contacts, it was able to be passed between the agencies and responded to. There was direct follow-up in cases of grave concern and they could ramp up other forms of support or offers of assistance.

The other thing was -

Ms FORREST - Will that continue?

Mr JAENSCH - Yes.

Ms FORREST - Because clearly that has had a benefit for some of these children.

Mr PERVAN - Absolutely.

Mr JAENSCH - That arrangement will continue.

At all times when the policy statement was made that our schools are closed - 'Please keep your kids at home if you can support them and support their learning at home', part of that messaging was for those who aren't able to provide a safe supervised home environment for their kids. Those kids and those families were encouraged to take advantage of the schools being open for them if they needed it.

Ms FORREST - Do we have figures on how many of those children fit into the category that came because they could not be educated in a safe space at home?

PUBLIC

Mr JAENSCH - I don't know if specific information was kept which distinguished children -

Ms FORREST - Essential workers, yes.

Mr JAENSCH - From essential workers and children who were vulnerable from an unsafe home environment.

Ms FORREST - Is it possible to find that out? I'm not asking for where they are from; I'm just asking the numbers.

Mr JAENSCH - I just don't know if it's kept.

Mr PERVAN - It would be kept by Education.

Ms FORREST - Okay.

Mr PERVAN - The numbers went up and down every day.

CHAIR - Thank you. I think we're getting to a stage where we may need to call you back, Roger. Josh, you had a quick question?

Mr WILLIE - In this space, I'm interested in that lockdown period. How were risk notifications to children where it may have been a priority 1 situation managed during lockdown? Also access visits for families is really important. We want to keep families together and reunite them if that's possible. How was that managed through the lockdown? I'm happy for you to take those questions on notice, given the time.

Mr JAENSCH - It's safe to say that urgent, high-priority, high-risk cases were dealt with according to normal protocols. Family visits were limited in cases just to observe that proximity and contact. Provisions were made, including by providing devices and data, for there to be more virtual contact with family members but also with Child Safety staff.

One of the things that has emerged is that sometimes more frequent, less formal, less organised contact with Child Safety staff has turned out to be better and the kids have responded better to it than less frequent, scheduled, organised, face-to-face visits where lots of people's days have to be organised around it. There has been some benefits from that which will carry forward.

Mr WILLIE - To follow on from Ruth's last point about kids at risk and emergency service workers, during that lockdown period we were dealing with families that didn't know what to say to the school, to keep engaged with the schools, so we were trying to represent them. It was very difficult. I did hear of an ad hoc approach. I heard of some very good school principals ringing families, saying that they're welcome to come and providing that duty of care. Other schools may have been a little bit resistant to kids turning up at the school gates. Could you provide some information about that?

Mr JAENSCH - We can take that as feedback. I do not know -

PUBLIC

Mr WILLIE - What was Child Safety's role in managing the risk to children and making sure that there was that passive surveillance as you described?

Mr JAENSCH - Can you answer that?

Mr PERVAN - Only in very general terms, in that that is where the vulnerable children panels were very active. If we did not have eyes on a child going to school because for various reasons that was not possible or it did not happen, we continued to have home visits, particularly for high-risk children. This is a bit of a raw nerve, there was a mention in another place that during the lockdown things like home visits stopped. As far as the Child Safety Service went, that is not the case. We continued to go to people's homes, to sit down with them, to meet with them, sometimes with PPE, sometimes not, because it was not known at that stage that that would be required. The visits continued, particularly to high-risk children, particularly when there were not eyes on them at a school or in any other context.

CHAIR - Thanks, Michael. I am going to have to close the session. It may be, minister, that there will be one or two other questions that members have that we will put in that list of questions to you, if you can accept that. Other than that, it could mean that we might have to ask you to come back again. If we can do it this other way, it may assist you. Thank you very much for being here today. Thank you very much for the way you have answered the questions. You will get that list from us as soon as we are able to do that. Thank you both.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.

PUBLIC

Hon. PETER GUTWEIN, MP, TREASURER; Mr TONY FERRALL, SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY AND FINANCE; AND Mr ANDREW FINCH, WERE CALLED AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Welcome, Treasurer, and Tony and Andrew. Thank you very much. I apologise for the delay in getting to you; we were in a very important session with the previous witnesses and it was difficult to close off. We do have a short break at the end of the session that you are programmed for, Treasurer. If you agree, if we need to, could we proceed past that time by a few minutes?

Mr GUTWEIN - That would be difficult, I have a full book for the remainder of the day. I am happy to go a few minutes over, but I am mindful -

CHAIR - Right, okay, thank you very much for that. We know everybody around the table. For Hansard, Gaye Mitchell and Debra Torley; secretary, Nat; and Ali, assistant secretary.

Andrew and Tony have both taken the declaration previously in this committee so there is no need to go through that process.

There will be an in camera session but if we can first go into the public session - Treasurer, is there something you want to pass on to the committee or do you want to go straight into questions?

Mr GUTWEIN - Thank you, Chair. I was hoping we could today provide, obviously, an economic fiscal update. I have raised with you previously, that on the fifteenth of this month we will be releasing the Revised Estimates Report. These will be the most current set of numbers in where our economy stands and where the Budget is at. If it suits the committee, I propose to have Tony Ferrall provide an update and an overview of what is included in the Revised Estimates Report.

It seems sensible to do that with the committee, to keep you fully informed rather than come back in three weeks time to talk about numbers, which are in the main about 99 per cent.

CHAIR - If the committee is happy for that to be the position, there would be an embargo for a certain period of time and when it is publicly released, we would then be able to use that information publicly.

Mr GUTWEIN - Absolutely and what is said and provided to the committee can certainly be used post the release of the RER on 15 February.

CHAIR - Prior to that commencing, do you want to disclose any other area to the committee? Any updates on any other areas that do not fit into that category at this time?

Mr GUTWEIN - The most appropriate thing to do in my role in front of the committee regarding the economy and budget circumstances would be to hand over to Tony Ferrall and go into in camera. Then he can brief you on his views of where the economy is and what will be included in the Revised Estimates Report, unless there are other questions.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - I will go to the committee to see if there are any other questions at this stage in the public session a member might have.

Ms FORREST - I appreciate the opportunity of going to a private session looking at the actual revised estimates but I am keen to hear your view, Premier, in a public setting how you think we are tracking. What the withdrawal, particularly of the federal government support, will mean for Tasmania. We have a higher proportion of Tasmanians receiving some form of government benefit. Also, withdrawal of some of the support measures you put in place with regard to tenancies and things like that may impact on the people of this state and the economy. Because their money is in short supply, they will spend and travel around the state less and it applies throughout. I will appreciate your thoughts and what actions you are taking through National Cabinet and other measures to ensure Tasmanians are not disadvantaged.

Mr GUTWEIN - I make the point I will work backwards on some of those matters.

First, I have made it perfectly clear both as Premier and Treasurer and on behalf of the Cabinet, that should we need to extend further support measures to any sector, we would look at that and as a government we would take action.

In terms of your question regarding the moratorium of rents - both commercial and residential - obviously that moratorium has timed out now. As a government we put in place ongoing transitional measures to ensure we provide support both to tenants and landlords as the process unwinds.

On broader matters, obviously, JobSeeker and JobKeeper will be of interest to the committee, and Mr Ferrall has some updated information he can provide to the committee once we start to work through the presentation.

Ms FORREST - On the impact and modelling that has been done?

Mr GUTWEIN - On the numbers of Tasmanians who will be receiving support, one important point I make is that many of you over the last month to six weeks will have had engagement with your local communities. I have certainly met and spoken to many people around the state, both in business and not in business. I have been somewhat pleasantly surprised by the increasing levels of confidence we are seeing across the broader community. It disturbs me in one sense that one of the singular largest concerns raised by employers across the state has been the fact it has been difficult to get employees.

I was on the east coast recently; i met Mr Tucker there and we spoke to around 12 businesses on that day. All of them indicated they had had a much better period than what they had previously expected. Most of them indicated they were up this year compared to where they were last year, but they were finding it difficult to find people, especially casual workers. They pointed to the fact they thought that some of the Commonwealth supplements were making that difficult. Interestingly enough in where we are with our civil and commercial construction sector, I note the most recent job advertisements we have seen indicated in the civil area, and also in the form of some of the lower skilled positions, are looking for a 90 per cent increase in positions available for machinery operators and labourers.

What we are seeing is what we thought would occur with a very strong construction sector - there are jobs available. If anybody has tried to get a plumber or a builder in recent

PUBLIC

times, I think you would accept the commercial sector is working very well. What we have to do now is to look at how we can assist people to transition. We provided significant funding in the budget with support for apprentices and trainees, but also additional support to ensure women were also provided with opportunities.

On one hand we are certainly not back to where we were 12 months ago; we are a long way forward on that journey and certainly in much better shape than what we had ever expected to be when you look back to April or May.

Mr O'BYRNE - Premier, with the anecdotal stuff you talk about, there are many stories across the spectrum around people's experiences. The east coast of Tasmania has done okay compared to what they may have predicted, but a whole other range of enterprises and regions have not suffered [done] so well. Particularly off the back of the northern beach's outbreaks, lots of New South Wales people cancelled their trips to Tasmania; we have seen South Australia and we have seen Western Australia. There is still an ongoing impact, and, as you know, the JobKeeper payments are structured to a point where if you drop below a certain loss, you trigger the support.

What discussions have you had with the federal government? Obviously, until a workable vaccine can circulate around the community and get us some level of security of travel - the Minister for Tourism and the hospitality industry has said we are facing three winters - it is nowhere where we need to be. What discussions have you had with the federal government about keeping JobKeeper going, particularly for those sectors that have been impacted?

Mr GUTWEIN - Obviously, the conversations I have with National Cabinet will remain in confidence. You mention anecdotal, to be frank I would say 'empirical' when somebody in a small business or a business comes forward and says 'My numbers are up considerably on where they were' and provides a percentage point on that. I would say a body of empirical evidence is starting to be built.

My other point is that, by chance, on Saturday I had a long conversation with one of the principals of one of northern Tasmania's largest accounting firms. To quote him verbatim, he said that - this is the way he put it - 'Surprisingly, I do not have one single client currently in trouble; the vast majority of them have strengthened their balance sheet over the previous period and are in a very strong position.'

I thought it was quite interesting to receive that feedback. I would not like to be the owner of a five-star hotel that relies on international travellers, or a five- to six-star Airbnb, for example, because those that target international clientele are certainly going to continue to feel part of this for a period of time.

We have been pleasantly surprised by the increasing activity occurring in our airlines, even though there has been some disruption with New South Wales.

My understanding is that the capacity into the state is increasing, and responding very quickly - in fact, to a point that I think most in the industry are surprised just how quickly the airlines have been prepared to pivot. Over the course of the coming 12 months, I think we will

PUBLIC

see that the circumstances that have occurred in Western Australia, and previously in Queensland and New South Wales, will to some extent be part of the way of doing business.

What has pleasantly surprised me has been the resilience of the Australian people and their appetite for domestic travel. With international borders closed over the coming year at least, and being proposed to be closed for longer than that, with many people looking to travel, and with the eastern seaboard open to Tasmania, I think we could potentially see a very positive period through our winter in terms of visitation to the state.

Mr O'BYRNE - Premier, I agree there's a whole lot of resilience, and a whole lot of domestic tourism occurring, and people are wanting to be confident and wanting to look forward, but in your responses, it seems that you want to discuss only the positives. I think we have to be realistic.

There's a reason why the Hospitality Association and the tourism industry more broadly have said this is a very tough period. There are anecdotal stories of good stories - there's no doubt about that - but the role of government is to intervene to make sure there's a safety net for people - and programs like JobKeeper were a safety net.

If everything is as rosy as you say, why are the Hospitality Association and the tourism industry calling for more support? They're facing effectively what they call 'three winters', and we're now seeing some real questions around people's capacity to trade through three winters.

Mr GUTWEIN - You have raised the three winters option. Could I just say that as a -

Mr O'BYRNE - It's not an option. It's what the industry is saying.

Mr GUTWEIN - As a government - and I will be perfectly clear and come back to where I started - I said that if we needed to respond as a government, we would. Now, we work closely with all sectors of our economy, and we will continue to do so, but the feedback, and the information we're providing at the moment would indicate we are in a stronger position than we had previously thought we would be in. Many businesses are in a stronger position than they had previously thought they would be in.

Ms FORREST - It was a pretty gloomy outlook, wasn't it?

Mr GUTWEIN - That's a fair point to make, but we are seeing strong growth, strong jobs growth. We're seeing strong economic growth overall, and we will continue to work with our industry sectors and, should we need to consider further supports, as a government, I have made the commitment that we will.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you support the continuation of JobKeeper if things continue as they are?

Mr GUTWEIN - What we have seen with the stepdown process with JobKeeper, especially moving from that first touchpoint - which would have been around August to September last year - is that with quite a substantial number of the firms that had previously been on JobKeeper, their turnover had returned to normal levels.

PUBLIC

When we see the next round of data - and we haven't seen it yet, for the quarter finishing the end of December - I think once again we will see a substantial lessening of the number of firms able to qualify for JobKeeper.

Now, in terms of supports, JobKeeper is a matter for the federal government. We will, as a state government, always respond, should we need either to advocate for more support or, conversely, provide more support ourselves. I've made that clear.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you believe you should advocate more for the tourism industry in Tasmania?

Mr GUTWEIN - At the moment, we're working off JobKeeper numbers, I think from August, September, Tony?

Mr FERRALL - Yes.

Mr GUTWEIN - Once we see a dataset that takes into account the quarter leading up to December, we will be better informed as a state government, and I am sure the federal government will be as well.

Ms FORREST - Do you expect to see that before the RER is out? Will it inform the RER or not?

Mr GUTWEIN - I doubt it.

Ms FORREST - Okay.

CHAIR - I am conscious of the need to get into the next session. John had a question in this area.

Mr TUCKER - I was going to ask a positive question, Premier. I appreciate your comments on these cuts. I have seen that people have changed a lot with their business structure, and everything like that, to get themselves out of this hole. But I also noticed yesterday that the tungsten mine on King Island is a great opportunity for the state. Are there any other opportunities that are coming forward out of COVID-19, on a positive note, that we can benefit from?

Mr GUTWEIN - That is a very broad question, but I think the short answer is yes. We are seeing a range of businesses that have pivoted and have changed their business models. Some of the feedback I am getting is that businesses, because of the way they are managing travel, and how they are now using information technology, have seen productivity increases, which is good for both their bottom line, and also the long-term employment of their staff.

I expect we will see confidence continuing to increase. Obviously, one of the factors we all have to be very mindful of is that with this disease, things can change very rapidly. Noting that this is being publicly televised, I would make this point, that the most important thing we can do, to ensure we have confidence moving forward is to ensure that we all remain vigilant, and that we do not become complacent.

PUBLIC

We can see what has occurred in Perth, in Queensland, in New South Wales, and unfortunately what occurred in South Australia as well - albeit somewhat erroneously informed at the time with their lockdown.

I just say to all Tasmanians, now is the time to accept that this is going to be with us for some period to come, and that we cannot become complacent. We just need to ensure that we continue to do all we can and, as individuals, take responsibility for ourselves as we work our way forward.

CHAIR - It is time to move into the in camera session and stop the broadcast.

THE COMMITTEE WITHDREW.

PUBLIC

THE COMMITTEE RESUMED.

Ms EMILY SHEPHERD, BRANCH SECRETARY, ANMF, WAS CALLED VIA WEBEX, AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Thank you for appearing before us again, Emily. This is your second appearance before us, so we don't need the declaration today. You have done all that, and you are aware of the process and the procedures in parliamentary reviews, and understand the privileges that apply to this proceeding, and the fact that it is a public session, that it is online and is being broadcast.

Emily, present today in the room we have committee members Nic Street, John here, myself - Ivan - Ruth Forrest, David O'Byrne and Josh Willie. We have our secretary, Nat Exel, and assistant secretary Allison Waddington; from Hansard, we have Gaye Mitchell and Deborah Torley.

Emily, we have the transcript of your previous evidence. At this stage, is there anything further you would like to pass on to the committee since you last appeared before us, that you would like us to be aware of, or should we go straight into questions?

Ms SHEPHERD - I am happy to go straight into questions, if that's the best use of your time, or I am happy to provide an update.

I know you received a copy of our submission to the independent inquiry into the north-west COVID-19 outbreak. We raised some key concerns in that submission, which obviously I discussed with the committee last time. I am happy to provide an update on where things are at now, if that's helpful.

CHAIR - Yes, that's good. Thanks, Emily.

Ms SHEPHERD - Thank you again for the opportunity reappear and provide this update.

When I last met with you all, it was clearly a very difficult time. We were coming to the end of the outbreak on the north-west coast, and we provided the committee with a copy of our submission to the independent inquiry. Obviously, we are very much in support of the recommendations that have come out of the inquiry, and we know that many of these have commenced implementation, but from our members' perspective, there is still work to be done.

Some of the key issues raised in that submission, and more broadly for our members across the state, related to accessing appropriate personal protective equipment to protect ourselves, our patients, other clients and residents. I am very pleased to report that this certainly has improved. Stockpiles of PPE are now at a much safer level, and supply chains to these areas, which are now based on usage as opposed to a historical number, have improved that access as well.

I will touch on some points there, and then head to some outstanding concerns. There has been a significant increase in the availability and access to education and training for nurses, midwives and care workers across the state, and particularly in the north-west - not just online training, but face-to-face refresher training around donning and doffing, which

PUBLIC

obviously was mandatory for all staff returning to work when the North West Regional Hospital and North West Private Hospital reopened.

Certainly there's been better communication, but what has also helped is the fact that we're not experiencing significant numbers of COVID-19, with staff operating as usual - albeit it's very different now, with increased infection control procedures.

Mental health support is an area we are still very concerned about, particularly in relation to staffing levels. I will touch more on that in a moment.

Last, the key priority area identified in our submission to the independent inquiry was contact tracing. Again, we're very pleased to hear that the Tasmanian Government has put significant funding into improving IT, which hopefully will improve ease of access and electronic storage of staff contact details, to better enable contact tracing for nurses and midwives, particularly within the public sector. These improvements will take some time to implement, but we very much welcome them.

I will quickly touch on the outstanding concerns of our members across the state, and I'm happy to take any questions about those.

More broadly, I think our members are very pleased with the position Tasmania is in, and the efforts made by the Tasmanian Government, the Health minister and Public Health to ensure the safety of all Tasmanians, and preventing additional outbreaks of COVID-19. The single cases that have occurred in hotel quarantine have been very well managed, and largely managed within the hotel quarantine space, rather than relying on transfer to the acute hospitals.

As I mentioned, there is generally a feeling among members that there is good access to appropriate PPE. We greatly welcomed the rolling out of fit testing, which we were advocating for, to ensure that the PPE our members were using across the state was actually ensuring their safety, and many of our members have taken up that opportunity.

In some areas it has been identified that one particular mask - which is a 3M mask, I believe - is the best fit for quite a number of our members, but unfortunately, at the moment that requires the use of a face shield in addition to the mask. There have been some difficulties in accessing the face shields. From our perspective, our view is that it would be ideal to have all THS staff, particularly those working in high-risk areas, to undertake that fit testing so that we can ensure that, if there is a further outbreak, we have sufficient supplies of the PPE we know staff will be using. Our members identify through that fit test what mask they need to use to get a seal to be safe so we can ensure that those stockpiles are going to be relevant to what the nurses and midwives require.

In relation to staffing at the moment across the state, we are hearing from members that there are difficulties in filling vacancies, difficulties with recruitment. Our members are reporting to us that permanent positions have been advertised but have been unable to be filled because of lack of applicants. That is having an impact on our members' fatigue levels, which remain quite high, particularly after a very difficult year, and in addition to the workload that COVID-19 prevention has brought with it. That includes the donning and doffing of personal protective equipment every time they are accessing or providing care and treatment to patients with respiratory symptoms, monitoring visitors and liaising with families, more often than not over the phone due to visitor restrictions, which are all on top of day-to-day business. That is

PUBLIC

resulting in increasing double shifts and fatigue. That is not helping the changing culture of people not coming to work sick when they know that areas are already short staffed. If they have a sniffle or a sore throat, there is that ongoing feeling of guilt about not going into work because it means that the area would be short staffed for that shift.

Our solution is to fully fund a relief factor that includes all types of leave. I think I spoke about this last time, but that would include funding leave such as long service leave, which currently is not funded for nurses and midwives across the State Service. Parental leave is something that cannot be necessarily planned, but you are reviewing each financial year and setting aside an appropriate average to cover the expected parental leave. Also setting time aside for education and training. Some of our members have reported that it is difficult to access the education and training that has been put in place to support the COVID-19 response because of high workloads and not being able to get off to attend that education.

Recruiting to a permanent pool, particularly in the north-west, so that when there are sick calls, or people can't come to work, there is a pool of staff who can be deployed to fill those shifts. That results in the area being safely staffed rather than understaffed, which puts staff and patients at risk. The other key issue is the environment, which we understand is not something that can be easily fixed overnight, is a longer term fix. One of the recommendations of the final report of the north-west independent inquiry was about social distancing and how the environment within our healthcare facilities is not conducive to that. We recognise that significant capital works would need to be undertaken to remedy that. From our perspective, in the interim there should be some exploration as to what separate facilities, albeit short-term, could be implemented within our health services, particularly at our larger public hospitals in the north-west, north and south to allow staff to have tea breaks and adhere to required social distancing.

With the Victorian situation, we know that staff congregating in tearrooms, at handover and instances like that caused increases in COVID-19 cases. That then transpires to additional cases among other staff and patients. That is still an area of concern.

Last, regarding infection control, members appreciate additional education and training and access to PPE. The concern is that if there is another outbreak, a lot of the updates with infection control procedures and policies are still communicated via email. It is difficult for staff to access emails during their shifts to stay abreast of those updates. We welcome fit testing and access to PPE. I will leave it there and I am happy to take questions.

CHAIR - Emily, I have a question on long service leave. What did you say about the long service leave?

Ms SHEPHERD - Currently nurses and midwives employed within the State Service have a leave relief factor attached to their employment which only covers annual leave and sick leave. That means that when their long service accrual falls due, they are not backfilled to take that 12 weeks long service leave. This means if that is a .84 FTE nurse, the establishment for that ward or unit would be reduced by .84 and not backfilled within the current funding arrangements.

CHAIR - So they have to do it from existing staff?

PUBLIC

Ms SHEPHERD - Yes. Or through casual pool. Where there is known leave occurring, the casual pool is often used to backfill that leave and there is no casual pool left to fill the sick calls first thing in the morning or before the late shift or the night shift because they are already being used to fill these other instances of leave, which should have been known about in advance.

CHAIR - I have one other question. You said there is difficulty in filling the vacancies, is that because they are just not out there? We do not have sufficient numbers trained within the state. Is that the reason for it?

Ms SHEPHERD - I don't think that is the case. We have hundreds of nurses graduating from the University of Tasmania each year. Some of it is related to the area in which the position has been advertised. For instance, if it is the emergency department, it may not be appropriate for an emergency department to take on eight additional nurses who have no training in emergency nursing. You need to take into consideration the skill mix. Those eight additional nurses would need supervision and support, orientation and training, and would not be able to fulfil the full scope that would be required for six months or so.

It is multifactorial. The other issue is the regionality of the positions, particularly in the north-west. We know recruitment is difficult on the north-west for nursing and midwifery. Our members and managers in that area report difficulty in recruitment in those regional spaces. It is a combination of factors.

Ms FORREST - Just to follow up on the leave relief. I believe what you said was to make sure there was an adequate pool of relief staff. The department would know who was due for long service leave and that is part of good long service leave management. Do you have an idea of how many fully funded FTEs you would need in the north-west, the north and the south to cover the long service leave entitlement that is emerging in the next 12 months to three years? This is going to go on for the next three years.

Ms SHEPHERD - Absolutely. I do not have the figures to provide to you as we do not have access to the numbers of nurses and midwives employed in each of the regions. Hopefully the department might be able to provide that detail. We note that it would be a significant amount of funding to allocate, but our view is that if we get the relief factor right and our baseline staffing on day-to-day rosters right, it should reduce the millions of dollars that are spent on overtime and double shifts. When we don't have that leave relief factor correct, that's when we see those double shifts and overtime requirements increasing.

Ms FORREST - Or people coming in when they're unwell because they see no other option which, yes, is a risk. If you then link that to what you mentioned about the difficulty in recruiting staff, particularly to the north-west, for example - I understand that you can't just put three or four new first grade nurses into the operating theatre, into ICU, into the emergency department - what do you recommend is done to address that?

We know that there is probably an adequate number of nursing midwifery graduates each year that we can draw on. Obviously, the midwifery graduates predominately come from the mainland, but there are Tasmanian people doing that training, but what do we need to do to address this?

PUBLIC

Ms SHEPHERD - It's probably a multi-pronged approach to address that. I think certainly in some of our regional areas we need to look at we can to make that employment prospect attractive, noting that particularly on the island accommodation is extremely expensive. Often accommodation is provided, but to be able to attract people to rural and regional areas, we need to look at the overall package to make it attractive and be competitive with other rural and regional areas around Australia so that we can be competitive in that market in keeping our own nurses and midwives in Tasmania but also attracting in the short term - do we put a broader strategic plan in place for those from other states and territories?

In addition, I think we also need to look at how we bring on our homegrown graduates, which we're very keen to see. In a lot of areas we've been able to negotiate what we call a 'clinical facilitator', which is essentially somebody who's not counted in the numbers or isn't allocated a patient load, if you like, for that particular shift because they want to provide that bedside support to that group of beginning level practitioners.

I think that, moving forward, we need to look at how we put that facilitator model, our preceptor models in place because with an increasingly ageing workforce we are seeing significant numbers leaving, and we need to look at how we better support bringing in those beginning level practitioners and certainly harnessing the knowledge and skills of our senior practitioners before they leave the nursing and midwifery workforce.

Ms FORREST - Obviously, there's two different aspects here. One is the international border closure, because we did get nursing and midwifery staff from other countries, but also the state borders, which are now predominantly open most of the time. What impact has that had on the recruitment, as much as you can comment on? I'm sure every state in Australia and territory is probably facing similar challenges so it's no good pinching staff from Victoria or New South Wales or Western Australia if it just perpetuates their problem. Has it had a big impact -

Ms SHEPHERD - Yes.

Ms FORREST - - the international border and the state and national borders?

Ms SHEPHERD - I am obviously speaking anecdotally and I don't have exact figures but, hearing some members, there has been a reduction particularly in interstate applicants to positions. I can't comment on the international applications. My understanding is there still are international applications, but obviously there are various categories of international applications that need to be considered through that process. I think it has had a degree of impact.

Certainly, the two-week quarantine required for those - and I know that there were nurses who transferred back to Tasmania or to Tasmania still undertaking that two-week quarantine period - had a degree of impact but, again, I can't comment on the exact figures.

Certainly you're right - we absolutely need to look at how we encourage our own Tasmanian-grown graduates into the health service to keep them in. Looking at bringing them in through the clear structure we have - as RNs as they're doing their training or continuing on into their EN or RN pathways within our health service - would be the best way forward.

PUBLIC

Ms FORREST - You mentioned briefly, but said you would come back to, the mental health impacts on staff. I am still hearing some quite distressed nurses and midwives who contracted COVID-19 during the outbreak and have perhaps not been adequately supported. How are you hearing from your membership? What needs to be done to further assist those nurses, midwives and, potentially, medical practitioners.

Ms SHEPHERD - Yes, all health professionals involved in that response and even those not necessarily involved on the frontline, but still impacted by workloads and stress. Someone might have a cough and they need to do the full PPE, do the test and [carry?] the weight of responsibility that if we do not get this absolutely right every time, we have the potential to trigger an outbreak. That weight is incredibly significant and should not be underestimated. For our members particularly, in the north-west and across the state who dealt with those particular cases, there is a huge level of fatigue that has not been addressed.

There is willingness from management to put in resources. ERPs highlighted to our members that there have been some additional resources in some areas, particularly in the north-west where additional psychological support has been offered, including group sessions. Our view is there needs to be a model with an ongoing mental health plan where these sessions are facilitated and part of the educational professional development calendar where people are checking in with their mental health, rather than a need to be an individual going to seek assistance. At the end of a busy shift, members do not feel they then want to make the call or go to an appointment, because it is another onerous task. This should be provided ongoing in the workplace and should be facilitated as a part of a regular mental health plan rather than an ad hoc approach.

Mr O'BYRNE - Emily, based on what you said today and your previous evidence, the system outside COVID-19 is already under a fair bit pressure and your members are working extraordinarily hard to hold it all together. What would be the impact of a positive case in workloads in the health setting? What impact would that have on other parts of the health system or the health system area where that outbreak occurs?

Ms SHEPHERD - It is hard to say. Where we and our members are now compared to where we were almost at this time last year is vastly different. There have been significant improvements of access to PPE and education and training - certainly a lot of learnings and understandings on the virulence of COVID-19 among our members. It is something they have never experienced before and they were working incredibly hard and doing an amazing job. There is still the weight of uncertainty about when or if we get another case, whether that would be isolated, would there be another outbreak and what would that mean? There still is significant anxiety among our members about that and what it would look like particularly with the current strain on the health service usual business without COVID-19 in the mix. There is a concern, among our members on staffing and whether we would have sufficient numbers to respond, not just within the Tasmanian Health Service, but Public Health, our testing clinics and also within aged care.

Mr O'BYRNE - You said there has been a significant increase in communication, which is obviously very welcome and has assisted in dealing with some level of anxiety. It would be interesting to hear your members' feedback because I hear anecdotally there is a patchy understanding on what would happen if there were a positive case with one of their workmates. I have heard essentially that the place would shut down, they would all go home, and a deep

PUBLIC

clean would occur. Do you think your members have a broad understanding, on the whole of what a response would like if someone presented to the workplace positive?

Ms SHEPHERD - I think they have a general understanding. Again, it's probably difficult to say they would have a full understanding, because I'm not sure that anyone would have a full understanding until the actual situation transpired. It would really come down to: Have they just presented to work? Have they engaged with other clinicians? Have they been working? It would all be very much related to the Public Health advice, contact tracing and the particular clinical situation, and it would be very different. I think they have a general understanding. I don't think there's a view that the workplace would automatically shut down. Perhaps in some of the more regional areas that concern exists.

If there were a positive case, particularly on our islands, for instance, that might mean the ability to be able to backfill with staffing would be incredibly difficult.

Sorry, I don't think I have answered your question very well.

Mr O'BYRNE - For example, is there a conscious conversation in health settings, in workplaces, around scenario-planning and a broad agreement about 'Well, here are the first three steps we would take given various circumstances.'. Obviously, there's health awareness through public information, but in a health setting there's a next level expectation about how we would respond. Within a region there's going to be six or seven options to respond to.

Is there a proactive conversation occurring, so that there is some level of awareness for your members in knowing - 'Well, I know what to do in the first three steps and then I will wait for advice beyond that'?

Ms SHEPHERD - Yes, I think there has been much better communication around that response and the escalation of different levels and when there has been escalation to the next level.

Certainly, those conversations have been happening more broadly. Particularly in those high-risk settings like emergency departments and ICUs, there is a pretty good understanding now. Obviously, for the macro-response and also understanding that there would be finer details and requirements as required through the Public Health advice.

Mr O'BYRNE - That's good to hear. I know broadly in the community - we heard evidence before from the Premier that he's concerned about complacency in the community around people reverting back to normal. Are there any signs of that around your membership workplaces?

Ms SHEPHERD - Based on our members' feedback, there is a degree of concern around complacency within the community, and also within the health service -particularly about social distancing in areas where staff might congregate for a handover or a multidisciplinary meeting, for example. It is requiring individuals to speak up and remind people of social distancing and those types of things. That comes back to some of the challenges and barriers to achieve that in the health setting due to the environment, but there is definitely a concern around complacency. We have an incredibly privileged position not to have positive cases in Tasmania or have a further outbreak and that has brought with it a degree of complacency around the basics of social distancing, hand hygiene and those types of things. It is certainly

PUBLIC

imperative we continue, but noticing too within our membership the fatigue levels which also have an impact.

Mr O'BYRNE - One final question, Emily. We had a positive case in a quarantine hotel. From your union's perspective, are you comfortable with procedures and the response, and if there were any learnings from that?

Ms SHEPHERD - I think those individual cases have been managed very well. As I mentioned, the nursing support that is onsite and particularly the addition of the mental health support in quarantine hotels has meant that, by and large, those cases have been able to be managed within the quarantine hotel. There is certainly a significant degree of confidence among the health professionals working within those hotels about the level of preparation that's gone in, taking learnings from other hotel quarantine scenarios around the country to ensure that they are as safe as possible.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Mr WILLIE - Emily, I am interested in the vaccine rollout, the next challenge in all of this. I am interested in the union's perspective around timelines, the communication you have had with government, your understanding around the priority, whether it is in a hospital-based situation, or your members in community settings. Can you talk to that? Do you have some views around the different types of vaccinations and the expectations of your members?

Ms SHEPHERD - We have had significant consultation around the vaccine rollout. We are still engaged with the minister on a monthly or more frequent basis with other key health stakeholders around matters involving COVID-19, and the ongoing management of that. The vaccine has been certainly a hot topic for the last few meetings. We have been involved in those conversations, most recently in relation to that initial phase of the rollout of the vaccine, with the Pfizer vaccine being the first vaccine for administration, and the hubs within the major hospitals across the state. We have been engaged with the minister and the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services and with Public Health around what that will look like in terms of administration - who will be required to administer it and where, and, as you say, the groups of people it will be administered to first. Our understanding is those most vulnerable will be prioritised in that first phase. In addition to that, we were made aware that there was an expression of interest going out to nursing staff to seek individuals to express their interest to be involved as immunisers of the vaccine.

We know that it is a huge undertaking. The different phases will require many health stakeholders' involvement. The Government has committed to continue to consult with us along the way, particularly given that a number of the administrators will be the current nurse immunisers and potentially more who will be brought to assist with the vaccination. In terms of the types of vaccines, the Pfizer vaccine and its cold storage chain requirements may prove challenging to get out to our regional and our rural areas. Again, that is something that is being worked through. We are pretty comfortable with the amount of planning and preparation that has gone into that so far.

Mr WILLIE - Does the union have a view around mandatory vaccinations? What is the Government saying in that regard if some of your members refuse to be vaccinated for whatever reason?

PUBLIC

Ms SHEPHERD - We have taken advice from our federal secretary who has attended the briefings with the minister around the vaccination rollout. The minister, Mr Hunt, has indicated that at this stage they are not recommending that the vaccine be mandatory for a variety of reasons, but purely based on the number of variables around the vaccine, it would not be appropriate to recommend mandatory vaccination. We are taking the advice from the federal government around that. In our discussions within the state, there has not been any suggestion at this stage that the vaccination would be mandatory. We will be encouraging our members who are appropriate to receive the vaccine that they receive it as an additional defence against COVID-19 and to protect themselves and those within the health services that they are working within.

Mr WILLIE - From your communication with government, everything is on track? We have heard reassurances from the federal government and state governments in that situation as well that there is no expectation of any delays in their rollout programs and their involvement in them.

Ms SHEPHERD - I haven't heard anything about any delays. My understanding with our most recent communication is that everything is on track.

Ms FORREST - Emily, you mentioned earlier the improvements that have been put in place, and also potentially further for contact tracing in health settings should a positive case appear in our settings. However, I know that in the past the rosters haven't been electronic, and changes have been made without proper recording. Have those sorts of matters been addressed and fixed, so that contact tracing can be effective and efficient?

Ms SHEPHERD - There will still be challenges around contact tracing for staff, given that it is still a paper-based system in terms of the daily staffing - or allocators as they're called - which is printed off the pre-planned roster. Obviously there are sick calls and things like that on any given day. These are manually entered into that allocator, and then updated electronically, so I think there are some challenges there.

Public Health has done an amazing job in actually being able to contact trace despite that, and I think everyone is more cognisant of the need for accurate documentation. Updating staff contact details is one of the learnings from the outbreak in the north-west. We certainly understand the prioritisation of government to update its IT infrastructure, particularly around HR records, so that this can be addressed completely in the future, but obviously that is a longer term fix.

Ms FORREST - You mentioned about perhaps having some separate facilities, particularly in the short term, if there was to be an outbreak in any of the health settings, to enable staff to have handover and meal breaks where they can socially distance. That's one aspect of the need to socially distance, but what about in the ward setting?

Do we have the capacity in our hospitals to ensure appropriate social distancing when caring for patients as well - acknowledging that you have to do things to your patients that take you within a 1.5 metre space from them. But the nursing staff and medical staff and other allied health workers who may need to be dealing with that patient?

Ms SHEPHERD - In the individual interface between the nurse or health professional and the patient, there will be times where social distancing isn't possible - as you say, with the

PUBLIC

caring interventions required - but, obviously, staff are conscious of PPE requirements in those instances. But certainly, within the ward environment, social distancing isn't achievable, and that includes medication rooms, for instance.

As you would be aware, at particular times of the day there will be nursing staff congregated in our medication rooms, to collect medications to administer to patients, where social distancing isn't achievable. Our members are social distancing to the best of their ability, but the environment is such that it's just not possible, while also maintaining safe patient care.

Ms FORREST - In terms of having separate facilities for handover and breaks, in the big scheme of things, how important is that, if you can't do it in the clinical setting?

Ms SHEPHERD - I think it's critical. We know in the Victorian outbreak there were marquees and demountables set up in car parks for staff to be able to go out and have tea breaks, because that was what was required to enable social distancing. If we were to have another outbreak within a healthcare setting and we didn't have those facilities, it's a significant risk.

Also, for those staff wishing to change out of their uniforms and utilise showers, in most areas across the state they might have access to a locker, but the majority of them wouldn't have access to a change room or a shower, to be able to change out of their uniform, or into their uniform when they arrive at work.

It's those types of infection control considerations that I think perhaps we've lost sight of in recent times, or since the last outbreak, where now we're seeing how essential they are, not just for staff who might be working in theatre, or in areas where we need to see more sterile fields, but in all areas.

Ms FORREST - Wouldn't that be a useful intervention, particularly in any area that would be likely to have respiratory patients, that there should be those facilities already?

Ms SHEPHERD - Absolutely. We would love to see that. I know that during the outbreak on the north-west, demountables were erected to support staff, to enable them to change in and out of the uniforms, but our view is that it should not just be during the pandemic that we have those facilities available because we do not know that there is a case of COVID-19 until there is. Being able to practise those important infection control considerations at all times would be the best way forward to prevent transmission.

CHAIR - Emily, I want to look at the resignations and separations from the organisation of nursing staff. Have those numbers gone up as a result - in 2020, for instance, was there an increase in those numbers in that area or is it similar throughout?

Ms SHEPHERD - I cannot comment from the Department of Health's perspective and its data but from the data we receive among our membership, those numbers have increased substantially. That includes those who have retired from the nursing and midwifery professions and some who have brought forward their retirement. We are also seeing an increase in numbers of nurses, midwives and careworkers who have chosen to leave the profession. We have also seen increases in those who have moved to other states and territories.

CHAIR - The other question I have is one that has been asked of me. We have nurses now working overtime, working double shifts and occasionally they have been asked to work

PUBLIC

longer shifts. What is the position if they refuse to do that? Do they have to close it down? What is the result?

Ms SHEPHERD - The result at times may be that if it is possible, beds would be closed if they could be, or not filled for a period until staffing could be achieved again; that would be in the minority. What we also see is that in areas and wards that are short-staffed, they work with fewer staff than they ordinarily would have expected to have to be able to provide quality patient care. They may bring in staff from another area as an additional support, but not necessarily skilled and trained in that area, to offer the full scope of knowledge required. I think those instances are in the minority because I know our members will, at a pinch, when they are told by their nurse unit manager there is nobody else to do a shift, do the double shift because they know their colleagues and patients will be disadvantaged if they don't.

Mr O'BYRNE - We have had a discussion as a committee around not only understanding the response from Government, but also [inaudible] the environment, conditions and preparation prior to the pandemic. We all agree nobody can fully prepare for a pandemic. I know that state Government does have a pandemic plan and there is an epidemic plan, and we deal with the influenza season every year. Reflecting prior to this, in terms of your members' experience across the Public Health system, was there an awareness of, or a discussion about or any coverage of a pandemic response, even an annual exercise or a scenario play-out prior to the pandemic occurring?

Ms SHEPHERD - No. In fact, on behalf of our members, in recent times we have had to advocate and lobby for an influenza plan to be able to ensure that areas like those we have been discussing, which were key concerns during the pandemic - staffing and backfill staffing if we had significant numbers go off sick - were able to be communicated to them. There was certainly no communication or discussion around a pandemic plan despite what we were seeing across the rest of the world.

Mr O'BYRNE - Well, that is the answer.

CHAIR - Emily, thank you very much. Is anything you want to leave us with in passing because we are just about out of time? Anything you haven't covered that you would like to cover right now?

Ms SHEPHERD - No, I don't think so. I appreciate the opportunity. I will just add to that point, the question from David: I should clarify that prior to the outbreak on the north-west coast, probably in the month before, the ANMF had discussions with THS management on that. My comment relates more to having a standing plan around the annual education and training about what we would do if there is a pandemic. I thought I had better clarify that one.

Mr O'BYRNE - But if you are struggling to get access to an influenza plan, I think it sort of coalesces from there, doesn't it?

Ms FORREST - Emily, you have annual mandatory training programs that every health professional has to undertake as part of their requirements for employment. Are you aware whether infection control and planning and training for managing an epidemic or a pandemic have been included in that? Have you advocated for the inclusion of a mental health component? I acknowledge your comments around the mental load of dealing with any patient with a respiratory symptom for any of the staff, particularly those who have been exposed to

PUBLIC

the outbreak in the north-west. Have you made representations around that to be included as part of the mandatory training?

Ms SHEPHERD - There is an online module that can be assessed from a mental health perspective for staff. I am not sure that it is mandatory, but it is available.

Regarding infection control, I understand the online module is mandatory. I am not sure if it is an annual refresher or of the frequency, but at the moment staff currently working who have not completed it have to complete it. Our view is that needs to be complemented by physical face-to-face education to cement that theory into practice, which is why the simulation aspect is really important. Otherwise you do not make that connection between something that you read on a computer screen and the clinical environment, about what it looks like and what that experience feels like to be able to put it into practice.

CHAIR - Emily, thank you very much, we are out of time. I appreciate very much your giving your time to us today. I informed you last year that we would be putting in an interim report before the end of last year. That did not occur, but we are now working on that report. We would hope to be able to table our report in the near future. That is where we are at. Emily, thank you very much.

Ms SHEPHERD - Thank you very much.

PUBLIC

Hon. GUY BARNETT, MP, MINISTER FOR PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND WATER, WAS CALLED.

Ms DEIDRE WILSON, DEPUTY SECRETARY, AND **Ms RAE BURROWS**, GENERAL MANAGER, BIOSECURITY TASMANIA, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR - For your information, this is a public session; it's being streamed online and parliamentary privilege applies while you're here. Once you leave here, it's not really known so you just need to be careful. All the information and evidence that comes out today will be produced in writing in due course and will be available publicly.

There terms of reference are clear. The inquiry is dealing with four terms of reference. I am making you all aware of that.

Minister, do you want to make a statement at the beginning for members? Following that we can go into questions.

Mr BARNETT - Thanks very much, Mr Chair, and to colleagues and Deirdre Wilson and Rae Burrows - it's really good to be here today. Thank you for the opportunity to be able to discuss the role of the Department of Primary Industries and Water and what it has contributed to the Tasmanian Government's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

I acknowledge the important work that's been undertaken by the department, specifically Biosecurity Tasmania, for managing the ongoing effects of the pandemic. The Government's strong border control measures are very important in keeping people safe. You've heard that said before by the Premier and many others across government, across this state. Managing the risks of COVID-19 coming into Tasmania is very important.

We have a sensible, swift and proportionate response to managing the borders to keep people safe, and specifically Tasmanians safe.

The COVID-19 emergency is a human health emergency which falls within the jurisdiction of the Emergency Management Act 2006 and the Public Health Act 1997. This legislation is the responsibility of the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Management and the Minister for Health and Community Services, respectively. Biosecurity Tasmania officers have been authorised to perform functions under the Emergency Management Act 2006 for administering the state's COVID-19 border controls. Biosecurity Tasmania has played a critical role in processing the passenger arrivals into Tasmania's airports and seaports. Since last December Biosecurity Tasmania has appointed an additional 80 border staff to undertake the important role of ensuring the emergency management and Public Health directions are adhered to at our borders.

Ms FORREST - When was that, minister - in December?

Mr BARNETT - Yes, since December last year.

Ms FORREST - That's only a couple of months.

Mr BARNETT - That's right. I can flesh that out for you, no problem at all.

PUBLIC

The Budget locked in \$6 million for continued delivery of traveller assessment and border control across the state. with the continued operation of the G2G PASS and the Tas e-Travel system. This funding is ensuring our borders remain strong and flexible to continue protecting Tasmanians from the threat of COVID-19.

In the agriculture and seafood sectors we've worked directly with industry to manage the impacts of the pandemic and to plan for recovery. The Tasmanian Government has provided support to the agriculture and seafood sectors through fee relief, direct relief, financial support, market development that is critical to ensuring their long-term viability. I'm sure all around the table would agree the importance of those productive industries.

In conclusion, COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on the agriculture workforce reliant on the itinerant seasonal workers to meet the labour demands during the peak period we're in at the moment. The Tasmanian Government introduced measures to mobilise Tasmanian residents to help with the planting, production and harvest seasons, to get the fruit picked, harvest the vegetables and to crush those grapes and get them off to market. That is progressing well. In addition to supporting local residents to access jobs in agriculture, we are also filling employment gaps unable to be met by the Australian workforce through the Australian Government's specific Pacific Labour Scheme and the Seasonal Worker Program. Thank you, once again, and together with Deidre Wilson and Rae Burrows, I look forward to answering some questions.

CHAIR - Thank you. All those positions are in place now for the additional officers identified?

Mr BARNETT - Certainly in terms of the detail and operational matters of employment of those important staff taken on. A whole range of staff has been taken on since November last year, so it is only in recent months. It is part of the \$6 million commitment to support border measures and is very comprehensive. The Premier made that decision to get the job done to meet the need to keep Tasmanians safe. With respect to the detail on where those jobs are and when they were employed and taken on as casuals, if I could pass to Rae Burrows, the Acting Director of Biosecurity Tasmania.

CHAIR - T I take it these officers are temporary as a result of our COVID-19 movements and necessary control?

Mr BARNETT - We can flesh that out for you. I will ask Rae Burrows to respond. All of that is on top of the funding support in the budget last year, which was \$2.6 million. We will deal with the first question, if Rae Burrows could respond.

Ms BURROWS - Thank you for the question. The recruitment started for 18 new staff at the end of November last year and by 23 December we had them all on board. We actually used a contractor to bring them all on board so quickly and they are all operational at the border right now. They are a mix of fixed term and seasonal casual staff. There is a mix of Band 3 operational field staff and some Band 4 supervisors, so we have teams. The 80 staff are available on three shifts throughout the day. As you can appreciate, flights are coming through from very early morning until quite late at night and translates into three shifts a day.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - They are operating at all the airports? Wynyard, Devonport, Launceston, Hobart and the TT-Line?

Mr BARNETT - Rae can provide details but the answer is, yes, at all our ports and our seaports, and also at Devonport.

CHAIR - Were they Tasmanians or were they taken from other states?

Ms BURROWS - Yes, they are fixed term and casual. They are only there until 30 June and their contracts say they are only employed while we need them. For example, if we went back to pre COVID-19 in May - I doubt we will, but if we did - we would have not requirement to continue their employment.

CHAIR - I want to ask a question around the functions of those officers. Do we still have officers at the airport doing the contraband checking and bringing in of fruit and produce that should not be brought into the state? Are they doing that also or picking up the other administrative functions, which I experienced on the weekend coming into Launceston?

Mr BARNETT - I could initially respond to that. Thank you, because it is an important question on the existing requirements and responsibilities of Biosecurity Tasmania staff. The answer is, yes, those existing responsibilities are still being met. In the last budget, I sought and thanks to the Treasurer who agreed, \$2.6 million to support and boost Biosecurity Tasmania to improve even further the work of Biosecurity Tasmania. That is a \$2.6 million injection based at our borders and our ports, and also our postal service, to ensure we keep out pests and disease. Fruit fly and other issues, as you know, have been ongoing, and we need to manage those risks very carefully.

The work, the \$6 million and the staff Rae Burrows has just referred to are in addition to the ongoing work of Biosecurity Tasmania. We have increased funding and support for Biosecurity at every single budget under our Government, and we see it as a top priority. I will just ask either Deirdre Wilson or Rae to add to that, if you could.

Ms BURROWS - Mr Dean, do you mean just at the airports or do you mean all the borders? Can I just clarify that?

CHAIR - Specifically the airport, but all the borders as well.

Ms BURROWS - At the airports we have continued to do our biosecurity risk assessment and delivery of services at the border, both with our existing staff and also these new staff who have been trained to ask the questions about biosecurity risk material. However, if they picked up a passenger with biosecurity risk material, it would be passed to our permanent staff. You may not have seen as many of our dog handlers at the airports during COVID-19.

CHAIR - I didn't see any.

Ms BURROWS - The reason for that is that the dogs are unable to act effectively in association with the hand sanitiser. You may have seen them if you had luggage coming through the carousel. That's where we've relocated the dogs now so they can actually still be picking up biosecurity risk material but at the luggage carousels.

PUBLIC

Also, during COVID-19, because we weren't able to use our dogs in the same manner at the airports as we did previously, we assessed our biosecurity risk elsewhere. As you're probably aware, the amount of post coming through was huge during COVID-19, and we reallocated our dog handlers to Australia Post, and they've done an excellent job of picking up a huge amount of biosecurity risk material coming through the post.

As the minister alluded to, our Securing Our Border staff started, as they are required to do, on 1 October, as that is the beginning of our high-risk season for fruit and vegies. This year is a particularly bad year for Qfly on the mainland, which we were very much aware of, and so we were very much aware that we couldn't stop delivering that. We did bring on some of our SOB, as we call them - the Securing Our Border staff - a little earlier, because we picked up some Qfly larvae in passionfruit, you might remember, right at the beginning of the season, in fact it was end of September.

We brought some who were already on our books on a little bit earlier, so we were able to allocate our resources to the high risk again. We also have a small group of people who come in normally in our high-risk season to do things like fruit fly trap surveys and blueberry rust surveys statewide, which we must do for market access. We have continued to deliver our business as usual but it's based on risk, all the same.

CHAIR - Thank you for that.

Mr O'BYRNE - Understanding the staffing requirement now, and now that the travelling is starting to occur, there will hopefully, be a rhythm occurring apart from shutdowns in WA. Back in the early days, there was an immediate response around the time of the outbreak and the change in circumstances to the State Controller and controlling the borders. What were the resource requirements asked of the department at the time to respond to that? Processing those people who were already on the way here, and where did they come from, and what skills did they have? That would be good to know.

Ms WILSON - Since March 2020, Biosecurity Tasmania border operations have included the coordination and management of passengers arriving at the border - both airports and ports - to ensure compliance with COVID-19 in strict directions. At that time, of course, there were fewer flights coming into Tasmania and fewer movements so effective passenger clearance procedures did require an increase in staffing levels at the border. We had up to seven Biosecurity officers per arrival to make sure we were meeting the requirements from the State Controller and the now the Deputy State Controller and we were able, based on risk, to move our resources to meet that demand.

As things have moved towards more passenger movements, we have moved the new cohort of 80 officers on so they're available to meet the fluctuating demands.

Rae, would you like to add anything else to that in terms of how we met that early requirement?

Ms BURROWS - I wanted to add an illustration. I have some figures here. For July 2020, we only 1722 passengers coming through for the whole month. That's the TT-Line and all the airports.

PUBLIC

In November, before the last the round, we had 35 000 coming through. During the guts of COVID-19 we weren't getting that many passengers coming through and so, while it took five or six people out at the airport to process them, it was only for a short time and there were only one or two flights a day.

Mr O'BYRNE - What about the time there was a higher level in the very early days? This inquiry is working through preparedness the moment it occurred and the response since, so it's good to get a time line and understand what's happening now. In terms of the time when it was all hands on deck, did you second people into your teams from within the department? Did you go to other departments? Where did you source that workforce from?

Ms BURROWS - We put out the call throughout the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment - DPIPWE - and we were successful in getting 10 Parks and Wildlife Services discovery rangers who were available in the off season. We had them come on board, and we also brought on the 30 casuals we have as a normal cohort from about September; we brought them on early as well.

Mr O'BYRNE - That's a physical presence at the borders. You also ran a helpline, in terms of people calling in to find out what they could and couldn't do. Is that right?

Mr BARNETT - I will check with Deidre Wilson or Rae Burrows on that.

Ms WILSON - I'm not sure what helpline you're talking about. There's the Public Information Unit and the whole-of-government call centre was established, and you may have heard about that when other ministers have presented here. We also had our ordinary AgriGrowth help desk staff, who were able to answer some specific questions around seasonal workforce issues and around specialist skills and the process for G2G applications - but noting that was advice and it was a process that was then managed through the State Control Centre.

Mr O'BYRNE - Did any DPIPWE staff get seconded or moved into that sort of environment to provide that advice and support or play those roles?

Ms WILSON - I might have to check my facts.

Is it all right if we bring Jo Crisp to the table?

Mr BARNETT - Yes.

Ms JOANNA CRISP, ACTING GENERAL MANAGER, AGRIGROWTH, DPIPWE WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

Mr O'BYRNE - In terms of the staff at DPIPWE, were they seconded or moved or did they play other roles in terms of the broader response? Did they leave their day-to-day role and move into this response? How many staff?

Ms WILSON - I apologise, I was going to the help desk to make sure I'd covered the bases on that so if you're comfortable with my answer, I'll answer in terms of interoperability and our engagement.

PUBLIC

Mr O'BYRNE - At least you prepared, now you can answer.

Ms WILSON - I am. I will answer in terms of interoperability and our engagement.

You would be aware that there is a whole-of-government arrangement around interoperability, and that DPIPWE, as an emergency response agency, has staff who are trained in emergency response roles, and others who can volunteer and engage. I am actually quite proud of our engagement with this response. We have about 185 full-time staff registered on the interoperability register through this COVID-19 period.

I do not have the most recent figures on the total DPIPWE interoperability deployment days, but to the end of October 2020, there were 643 deployment days.

Just as some examples, our staff were deployed to external government agencies within the STC, Ambulance Tasmania, the regional groups, obviously in the north-west and the north, and to the THS COVID-19 response. We did have an active engagement in supporting the response. For the record, I also note that interoperability was also used when we were responding to Qfly, when we were the lead emergency management agency. It provides surge capacity in emergency response that is very valuable.

Mr O'BYRNE - In relation to those early days, obviously it has been reported in the media that a number of *Ruby Princess* passengers were identified at Launceston Airport in late March, and they were - I am not sure if 'detained' is the right word, but they were isolated by security staff and then they were allowed to continue on into the community. Could you inform the committee what happened on that day?

Mr BARNETT - Thank you for the question. Being an operational matter, I will ask Deidre Wilson and/or Rae Burrows.

Ms WILSON - I believe that the facts regarding the *Ruby Princess* are on the public record. On 17 March, the Director of Public Health declared a public health emergency. On the same day, the Director of Public Health issued a direction that each person in Tasmania who arrived in Australia from overseas at any time on or after midnight, 16 March 2020, was to isolate himself or herself for 14 days from close contact with all persons et cetera. On 20 March, the State Controller issued a direction, to take effect from 11.59 p.m., that required each person to isolate, regardless of whether they had travelled internationally.

What we had was existing directions that applied to arrivals. In addition, the Department of Health, at the time, made contact with any *Ruby Princess* passengers, notifying them that they were all required to quarantine until 2 April, 2020. The requirements were clear in terms of what passengers were required to do.

Mr O'BYRNE - In terms of the functions of quarantine, your staff member identified that they were *Ruby Princess* passengers. They would have been identified nationally as a potential risk. That would be right, that the *Ruby Princess* passengers were identified as a risk?

Ms WILSON - I believe it was well known at the time that there were issues with the *Ruby Princess*, and that there were public statements and announcements at the time, informing *Ruby Princess* passengers of their requirements.

PUBLIC

Mr O'BYRNE - Again, we have heard this through the media, and I just want to get the department's perspective, what did your staff members do when they identified the *Ruby Princess* passengers?

Ms WILSON - I am not able to talk about that particular incident, because I was not engaged in that incident in terms of any reporting through Biosecurity. I think it was well covered in budget Estimates that the rules were in place, and those rules were in place, and those rules were in place and applied based on Public Health advice and directions, and that all relevant information was put forward to passengers about their obligations.

CHAIR - For your information, this is a Public Accounts Committee inquiry, it has nothing to do with Estimates. So, any evidence and questions you answered during Estimates should be answered here also if they are asked. Thank you for that.

Ms WILSON - Understood, I do apologise to the Chair.

Mr O'BYRNE - It is about understanding the decisions at the time, and it is for others to judge appropriately. I am trying to get the facts on the record, because the committee's report will recommend future procedures to government to respond to any future pandemic.

My understanding is, and correct me if I am wrong, that the quarantine officer identified that these were *Ruby Princess* passengers. This was a number of weeks after cruise ships were banned from Tasmania. They identified them as a potential risk and isolated them; they then notified the State Controller. Did they notify the State Controller, or did they notify their supervisor? I just want to understand what happened.

Ms WILSON - As noted, there were directions at the time that required people to isolate at home.

Mr O'BYRNE - There was no involvement from Tasmania Police, or the State Controller, or any other agency, to ensure those passengers did that?

Mr BARNETT - If I can jump in, because we have had a whole range of questions regarding the *Ruby Princess*, and it is fair to note that the facts are on the public record regarding the *Ruby Princess*. Yes, there was discussion at budget Estimates, and you're absolutely entitled to ask the questions now, but the facts are and have been discussed, and they are on the public record. The second thing I would make clear is that we have had an independent review. The Greg Miller inquiry looked into this in great detail, and a whole range of things in terms of the north-west coast. That report came out towards the end of last year, and the Premier released it publicly.

CHAIR - I understand that, and I do not think the member is going to go into a great number of questions in this area, but members are entitled to ask questions on this, even if it is on some other record, provided it relates to our terms of reference, and I am sure it does.

Ms WILSON - With due apologies, and I note that what I could say is that Biosecurity Tasmania operates in terms of procedures. Right from the start of this incident, in this emergency response, we started to develop - and we did develop - standard operating

PUBLIC

procedures for international passengers, and we have continued to develop and adjust our standard operating procedures.

Our standard operating procedures are what we induct people in, we train people in, and we are reviewing at all times. If we get a report where someone says at the border, 'I think this happened and I should have been advised of something else', we do a review. We are always assessing our systems and our processes, and we are always updating our standard operating procedures.

We did develop, on 16 March, a standard operating procedure for international passengers following the announcement by the Prime Minister. That was our starting point. We continued to adapt and adopt standard operating procedures as the rules changed, and as the border protection directions were adjusted.

When hotel quarantine was introduced, for example, which is different to home isolation, we developed a different standard operating procedure.

The other thing I can add is that the cooperative engagement with other agencies has been outstanding to be involved with. We always work well together, but in an emergency response we have really coordinated very well. The SCC set up committees and processes, but also, we have been engaged with our colleagues at Communities, Tasmania Police, Biosecurity and Public Health. We meet every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, just via teams meetings, and we talk regularly about the current topical issues - what has happened, what might have happened, where we might need to adjust our systems and procedures. We keep a constant dialogue so we can adjust and make sure we are complying and delivering on the really important Public Health directions and measures.

Mr O'BYRNE - At no point am I attempting to cast any aspersions on the staff of Quarantine Tasmania, because in my reading of what occurred, your staff member did absolutely the right thing. I understand the restrictions and requirements and the hierarchy of risk mitigation and risk management.

The Prime Minister may have said 'any international', which is a very broad risk mitigation, but when there is a known source of COVID-19 and a super-spreading event like the *Ruby Princess* and one of your staff members has done the right thing. They not only looked at the restrictions, but identified a potential greater risk to Tasmania that may not have been in place at the time in terms of consideration of risk, that they identified and isolated those passengers and sought more support.

We know the *Ruby Princess* passengers became super-spreaders across the country and it was the source of the contraction on the north-west coast. The question Tasmanians would have is: we are extraordinarily lucky, but why was that decision made to allow those passengers to circulate into the community - not quarantined and not being identified as a potential greater risk?

Ms FORREST - You are asking when they got off the boat in Sydney or when they got here?

PUBLIC

Mr O'BYRNE - When they got here; that's right, yes. Your quarantine staff members have done absolutely the right thing by identifying a greater risk to the Tasmanian community. The question asked: is how did that decision occur?

Mr BARNETT - If I can just kick it off and then pass to Deirdre. It is fair to say the Government made decisions based on the best information it had at the time and sought to proactively act and respond every step of the way. You asked as part of your question what has been learned and why I referred earlier to the independent reviewer's inquiry - Greg Melick, did a very thorough report, delivered that back in early December and it was made publicly available.

It is absolutely true there are lessons. There have been lessons and findings come through in that report and that should be acknowledged. I want to make it clear as a government they certainly made decisions based on the best information they had at the time to respond in a proactive way to keep Tasmanians safe.

Ms WILSON - I would concur.

Ms FORREST - Can I follow up on some of the comments just made there, minister. Obviously, there have been a lot of learnings and we have learned a lot along the whole journey of this because things have changed, including the virus in some settings.

Regarding the response, you mentioned things you have learned and how you have adapted and Deirdre mentioned the regular team meetings and things like that. There is always going to be something potentially - hopefully not for a long time but it could be next week and we have still got a while to go in the play out of COVID-19, but hopefully we will get to the end of it at some stage. During that period and any interval between that and another sort of similar threat, what are the things you should keep doing because they will assist in the preparedness and assist in any response? There may be benefits in other areas of biosecurity not just related to humans.

Mr BARNETT - You have asked a really good question and something at the forefront of the Government's mind, because this is something we regularly try to review across government.

Deirdre Wilson just referred to the various government agencies involved in this protecting Tasmanians and keeping them safe. We work across so many different government agencies, whether it be police, Health, our department, Biosecurity Tasmania, or DPAC. I cannot tell you the amount of regard and admiration I have for the members of the public service who have been leading this effort across government and then adapting - and I use the word 'pivot'. Pivot has been a big word during 2020 for sure, because we have had to adapt to the circumstances. I will pass to Deidre, because there have been learnings along the way.

It's not that we're suddenly in 2021, how do we do it differently? That is why we have put in further funding support with that \$6 million since November, December, January and through to 30 June. We will review it. If we need further support, we will be discussing that with the Treasurer and further funding will be provided.

Ms FORREST - What specific things, minister?

PUBLIC

Mr BARNETT - Specifically the \$6 million is a very good initiative. I will pass to Deidre; I am sure you will have some examples.

Ms WILSON - Regarding general principles around emergency response and recovery, the framework that has been used in the State Control Centre and the systems and procedures are something that have passed the test at a large emergency response such as this. The response principles we apply in Biosecurity Tasmania are about a common framework for an emergency response. Whenever we have exercises we ask, is our Tasmanian emergency, our TEMA, up to date? Are our systems and procedures and standard operating procedures ready?

Because we are still in this emergency response, I would say 'systems, structures, procedures'. Ongoing engagement and training in interoperability are some of the things that, in my role as the deputy secretary looking after Biosecurity Tasmania, I would advocate as being strongly pivotal to -

Ms FORREST - Will you continue beyond?

Ms WILSON - Yes. If I could talk in general principles on biosecurity responses, we obviously went through our Qfly response and we had the independent review. We do a post review asking what systems worked, what worked well, what do we need more? After the Qfly review, we have been continuing to implement its recommendations, but also updating our systems and procedures. We take the lessons learnt. Rae, in terms of those general principles around emergency response, what we take from going forward?

Ms BURROWS - To be a bit more specific, some of the lessons learnt from the Qfly, not so much from COVID-19, included the preparation of equipment and chemicals in the case of Qfly. As far as Biosecurity is concerned, we now have an emergency store that has 10 laptops ready to go, and we have all the chemicals we would need for the range of high-risk pests. Enough for the first two weeks is sitting in store at the moment ready to go. PPEs that we need for both Qfly and for COVID-19 was a lesson from COVID-19 as well. You may recall there was some concern at the beginning that there may not be enough PPE for the COVID-19 response. That did not materialise, but it is something we have taken on board. We have a huge amount of PPE, not just in BT, but Health and others have a huge amount of PPE now sitting in stores ready to go.

Ms FORREST - Acknowledging that some of that goes out of date, you do need to cycle it through.

Ms BURROWS - Correct.

Ms WILSON - We monitor that. But I still come back to, if I could, through you, minister, to those first principles about emergency response. It is about ensuring you have the appropriate systems and procedures. Another lesson I have learnt over the years is no emergency is the same as another. You need to know the command structure within the emergency response. People need to understand their roles and functions within the emergency response. That is where our interoperability training and our internal training around emergency response and preparedness is really important. We cannot forget recovery as well, minister. We have roles and obligations as an agency for the support and recovery for our agricultural industries and our fisheries, for example. That is where agrigrowth is involved.

PUBLIC

Ms FORREST - Before we go on to that, if I might, minister, ask you: most of these decisions and actions and processes have been developed predominantly under the Emergency Management Act, but there is other legislation, the Public Health Act, where the State Controller takes over so some of that command and control. In key areas like the Emergency Management Act, the Public Health Act and any other relevant acts that you operate under in this biosecurity area, do you think there are shortcomings? Is this going to be looked at overall? It may not be a specific question for you, minister, because it's not really your area, but do you think there are areas that perhaps should be looked at? As a committee we need to consider what recommendations might need to be made to improve it.

CHAIR - Just before you answer, minister, I'm going to get kicked here shortly because Nic Street was on the list for the next question. I want to make sure I get to Nic before we run out of time. Minister, if you could answer that question fairly quickly.

Mr BARNETT - It's a really good question. Emergency management is primarily for the State Controller and the Deputy State Controller as opposed to myself as the relevant minister, or even Deidre Wilson in my department. Likewise with the Public Health Act, that's the Minister for Health and Community Development.

The answer is, yes, there are lessons that can be learnt. This is an ongoing process where we are adapting as we go. We're responding to the circumstances.

Deidre's talked about those regular meetings. We have regular meetings not just across Government but also with our stakeholders. That's been one of the lessons for me. That's been a real stand-out in how successful it's been. Meetings with our agriculture, fisheries, forestry, mining, all those productive industries - meeting with them and responding not just to the challenges and concerns but also the opportunities. Deidre Wilson mentioned some of the support we've provided to those stakeholders as a result of those roundtables as a result of knowing problems and challenges they have. We have adapted. The key principle is adapting and being able to pivot.

Ms FORREST - So are the state's Emergency Management Act and the Public Health Act adequate to meet your services or are there gaps?

Mr BARNETT - Regarding those two pieces of legislation, I can't comment on behalf of the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Management or the Minister for Health, but from my point of view, my agency has worked very cooperatively and in a positive, collaborative way with regular meetings to provide input and add value to the services there. I am sure lessons from those meetings and discussions will be taken on board. I defer to Deidre Wilson about that.

Ms WILSON - I think that anything regarding the Emergency Management Act and the Public Health Act are matters for those ministers, as the minister has said.

Biosecurity Tasmania has been able to discharge its functions as provided for under the emergency powers. I think that's all I can say.

What I can say in the broader emergency response field, with the Quarantine Act, the Animal Health Act, we have particular powers where we're the lead agency and we're always

PUBLIC

looking at those acts for improvement. That's why the Biosecurity Act is set up as a framework legislation.

We recognised that having a new biosecurity act to contemporise and ensure that our systems and procedures and powers were appropriate to deal with our biosecurity response. It needs to be appropriate for the modern era. We are continuing to implement that act. As you are aware, apart from the Animal Health Act, most of the other acts will be repealed and we will have one act. That has been our most major reform.

Mr BARNETT - The biosecurity legislation is a watershed development, when we did away with so many pieces of legislation all in one deal. I can't tell you the support that we've had from industry and the community. It's not just government responsibility, industry responsibility, it's everybody's responsibility. That's protecting the Tasmania brand, keeping us free of pests and disease. We are so pleased with the biosecurity efforts that are undertaken.

CHAIR - I have another question but I am going to Nic.

Mr STREET - Minister, in my local area two industries have been really adversely affected. The first was seafood exporters early on and more recently fruit growers and access to pickers, but also access to export markets. Are you able, just briefly, because I know Mr O'Byrne will have more questions and I don't want to take up all the time, briefly touch on some of the support we have put in place for those two specific industries?

Mr BARNETT - A good question, and very important industries for Tasmania. First, with respect to seafood, we were the first state in Australia that responded in terms of rock lobster and the problems regarding China in terms of the rollover of that quota. We delivered a \$5 million support package, direct financial support. Thanks very much to the Premier - he responded so swiftly to those requests and that provided support for rock lobster, giant crab, scale fish, abalone and shellfish growers. Strong support for the fishing industry, and then with fee and licence relief. They did appreciate it. We provided support for the Tasmanian Seafood Industry Council in terms of responding in the workplace because of the mental health issues. Rural Alive and Well provided that initiative for TSIC so that was very much appreciated - the Stay Afloat campaign.

We have been very active with the fishing industry and across the board - rock lobster, abalone and the like. They have welcomed that support and we continue to provide support. Work Team Tasmania [TBC] I often talk about it - it's working well. You asked about the fruit industry; I am trying to sum it up for you - it's not just fruit, it is actually agriculture in terms of the Agricultural Workforce Resilience Program, a \$1.9 million program announced last year. Why did we do that? We are responding to the industry, responding to its concerns. We did what is called an environmental scan, an assessment of the needs of the industry as we go into the peak season. We are in the middle of the peak season now.

We responded to that in advance. We did the research and, guess what, we are leading Australia when it comes to the initiative of providing that support so we can pick the fruit, harvest the vegetables, crush the grapes and get them off to market. It is a big challenge and there is still more work to do. Because we had those roundtables, we have responded. We have the Safe Farming Tasmania initiative to help people understand how to operate in a COVID-19-safe environment on their farms and in their processing facilities.

PUBLIC

I assure you this was a huge issue, particularly when it first started, so that you operate in a COVID-19-safe way to keep Tasmanians safe - employees safe, their families safe. It has been very encouraging and I would like to do a shout to those industries - thank you for the work you have undertaken working with Government and with my department. They have done a fantastic job.

I should mention Jo Crisp has just come back from an agricultural coordination roundtable. Unfortunately, I could not attend today, but I attend most of them. My office attends, the department attends and leads them. That is with all those key stakeholders working together on a regular basis, getting feedback on the challenges and concerns and any opportunities and responding to that. I thank Jo and all the team in the department for their leadership working together with industry to get the job done.

Mr O'BYRNE - I have a couple of questions. How many instances, at borders, where quarantine officers have had to call Tasmania Police to deal with an incident or an issue or a potential breach? You have quarantine people coming and they are not following your instructions, I assume then the protocol is to escalate that to Tasmania Police?

Mr BARNETT - You mean travellers coming in at an airport or port?

Mr O'BYRNE - Either travellers or freight forwarders - people moving in or out. What are the incidences where you have had to escalate that to keep Tasmania safe?

CHAIR - My question for that was along the lines of border breaches, the number of border breaches you would have had during this critical period, March to November in 2020. What has happened and what was the process?

Mr BARNETT - I think that is an operational issue so I will pass that along. It depends on your definition of a breach and when did the police come. I will pass the question to the department.

Ms BURROWS - I will describe what it is like, to give some context. While our BT staff are certainly there checking QR codes and asking the questions they are required to ask, we also have police in attendance at both the airports and the TT-Line and they are standing close by our BT staff.

Mr O'BYRNE - Sorry to interrupt, wasn't there a period where police were no longer at the airport? There was a period where they were removed?

Ms BURROWS - When we had all low-risk states on the mainland, yes, there was a short period when the police weren't there. You can appreciate that, because people were moving through very smoothly; there weren't any problems, frankly.

Mr O'BYRNE - How long a period was that for?

Ms BURROWS - I am guessing, because everything is becoming a bit of a blur to me now, but it was a matter of weeks, maybe two weeks. It wasn't long, I have to say.

Mr O'BYRNE - From now on, if there is a low-risk environment with travellers, Tasmania Police will not be present. They will only be present when you escalate the risk?

PUBLIC

Ms BURROWS - Yes, that is absolutely correct. We have a hotline with the police. If we do happen to come across a disruptive passenger or something, the standard operating procedure for our staff is very clear - they are not to try to de-escalate in the manner the police would; they merely report it to the hotline. Is it okay if I go back to the original question?

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes.

Ms BURROWS - We have police standing in association with our BT staff, and we also have the health screeners standing quite close by to our BT staff. The reason I am setting that picture is because if there is a passenger who is disruptive or upset that they have to go into government accommodation, it's not a case of making a formal breach right then and there. My BT staff will call the police over, and the police will try to de-escalate the situation straightaway. A number of those have happened throughout the period, as you can probably appreciate, that did not get any further. The police, just by their uniform and poking their head close to the window, 1.5 metres away, of course, and having a chat with the disruptive passenger has meant it has not gone any further.

The actual number of ongoing disruptive passengers is probably - I cannot tell you the exact number but I would say that it is probably one handful over the whole period.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you track those incidents? I am assuming in terms of debrief at the end of the shift you would identify those incidents. Could you provide the committee with that information?

Ms WILSON - Biosecurity Tasmania staff, through their structures, always do a debrief around any incidents. Of course, if there were an incident that involved any threat to our staff, we have a process for registering incidents. Of course, health and wellbeing is a paramount priority. I don't just say that; it really is something we are really cognisant of, especially with the fact that when we have rules in place at the border, a high-pressure situation. Any specific incidents escalated formally to the police, they would keep a record of. We would not have that information with us.

Mr O'BYRNE - But you would keep a record of incidents, though, wouldn't you?

Ms WILSON - If it required a work health and safety incident response report, yes, we would.

Ms BURROWS - The compliance with the rules, particularly with isolation at home and/or going to government accommodation, is the responsibility of the police. But if we have any inkling that a passenger we have just dealt with is not going to comply, we have a mechanism where we formally tell the police we have concerns about this individual and they will follow up with that as well.

Mr O'BYRNE - We do not need to know the details, but you would record the numbers of that so you can track it? If there is a reference to Tasmania Police about a concern, you would say out of 1000 people visiting, we've had 10 references to police about a level of concern. I'm assuming you tracked that?

Mr BARNETT - Yes. If I can just clarify, I'm sure this would be incredibly relevant to the minister for Police, and to Tasmania Police and the SCC, the State Controller.

PUBLIC

Mr O'BYRNE - It's about the safety of your staff as well.

Mr BARNETT - I think Rae has given a very good response with respect to the incidents and the importance of protecting Biosecurity Tasmania's staff. This is a top priority, as Deirdre Wilson has indicated. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Ms BURROWS - I don't know the exact numbers, but I think we may have three incident reports since March, through the process that Deirdre outlined, where our staff have felt concerned about their safety because of an unruly passenger. It's not 10 in 1000, as you've -

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes, I understand.

Ms BURROWS - I know you just plucked that out of the air, but the more real figure is probably around three to five in the whole period.

Mr O'BYRNE - Okay. A question about Border Force. Obviously, there's a discussion with the New Zealand Government about international travel directly into Hobart, so there has been lots of discussion about Border Force. It was due to launch in January, and now March, or we're not sure. What discussions have you had with Border Force, and what does that look like?

Mr BARNETT - This is a question for the Department of Premier and Cabinet, who have direct discussions and ongoing liaison with the New Zealand authorities. Yes, it is important in terms of New Zealand/Tasmania travel. We obviously look forward to that in due course, but that's not a matter that we deal with directly in my department. Deidre Wilson can confirm that, but it's definitely important to DPAC.

Ms WILSON - What I would say is that we do have a relationship with the Australian Government in terms of our - for example, we undertake some quarantine operations on behalf of Border Force. Once arrangements are settled for any international arrivals, if there is a requirement for us to liaise with them, we would certainly do so.

Mr O'BYRNE - Who manages the quarantine risk for Tasmania, then? Border Force, or the state department?

Mr BARNETT - Absolutely a fair question. Deirdre might share the arrangements in place with Border Force and how that operates in Tasmania, or Rae might do that.

Ms BURROWS - Biosecurity Tasmania has a service level agreement with the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, the Commonwealth body responsible for the international arrivals of produce and people.

I need to flag that, of course, we've had a few international arrivals come through during this period - Antarctic explorers, for example. We already have an extremely good relationship with both Border Force people here, and also our DAWE colleagues in Victoria in particular, because we have this service level agreement with them.

Biosecurity Tasmania staff actually deliver a range of services on behalf of the Commonwealth for international arrivals, mainly of produce that comes through. Because they

PUBLIC

don't have staff down here, we will actually deliver that for them. It's an incredibly strong relationship anyway.

Mr O'BYRNE - Are you expecting to be required to provide any services to the New Zealand link?

Mr BARNETT - If I can pass that back to Deirdre or Rae.

CHAIR - Before you do answer it, we are beyond our time. Minister, if you are prepared to sit a little later, I will allow this to continue.

Mr O'BYRNE - I think it's really interesting in terms of a potential risk, that's all.

Ms WILSON - You have mentioned the word 'risk'. What I would say is that we have an existing strong relationship and a service level agreement, so when arrangements are there, and if there is a role for Biosecurity Tasmania, we would, under our existing arrangements, be able to fulfil that. I have full confidence that we would be able to either support their officers and/or provide a service, or work cooperatively.

Mr O'BYRNE - But you have had no discussions to date?

Ms WILSON - We have, yes. Sorry. Rae.

Mr BARNETT - Back to you, Rae.

Ms BURROWS - We have had, because this service level agreement I speak of was actually due to be reviewed six months ago in the middle of COVID-19, we have had a lot of discussions about what might be required by the Commonwealth when we did get international flights coming through. We have been expecting these for some time now. My specific example I can offer is - would the Commonwealth like us to deliver the dog detector services - because, as you know, we have a dog service so why bring their dogs over if we have the same trained dogs and so forth? At this stage, it is still in discussion, but we are trying to make it as efficient and effective as possible.

CHAIR - The extra infrastructure put in place, minister, for the biosecurity checks and people coming through airports. Launceston has a terrapin specifically set up. I suspect other airports might have something similar. Who is that cost against? Is special COVID-19 money provided for that, or is it a cost against Biosecurity?

Ms WILSON - At this stage we are still paying those accounts. The cost will come into our Biosecurity Tasmania and DPIPWE and we will put that against our COVID-19 expenses. At the end of the year, we will make an arrangement about whether that sits within our \$6 million or if another allocation is required. Last year, we used requests for additional funding for those unforeseen COVID-19 expenditures that were not reimbursed through the National Partnership Agreement, so there are no processes for that.

CHAIR - Thank you very much. Thank you, minister, for your presence today and Deidre and Rae for the answers to the questions and we appreciate it.

PUBLIC

I do not think any questions were taken on notice so you should not hear anything from us in that way.

I appreciate you extending your time.

Mr BARNETT - Thank you, Chair. Thanks again to Biosecurity Tasmania and my department for all their efforts during COVID-19. I am putting that on the record again as it has been outstanding.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.