



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

(Reference: [COVID-19 pandemic response](#))

Members:

MR A COE (Chair)
MS T CHEYNE (Deputy Chair)
MRS V DUNNE
MS C LE COUTEUR
MR M PETTERSSON

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 14 MAY 2020

Secretary to the committee:
Mr H Finlay (Ph: 620 50129)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

WITNESSES

BERRY, MS YVETTE , Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation, Minister for Women.....	176
CROSS, MS REBECCA , Coordinator-General, Whole of Government (Non-Health) Response to COVID-19.....	194
EFTHYMIADES, MS DEB , Deputy Director-General, System Policy and Reform, Education Directorate	176
HAIRE, MS KATY , Director-General, Education Directorate	176
HAMILTON, MS JUDITH , Acting Executive Group Manager, School Improvement, Education Directorate	176
HAWKINS, MR ROSS , Executive Group Manager, System Design and Delivery, Education Directorate	176
HUXLEY, MR MARK , Executive Group Manager, Emergency Incident Controller, Education Directorate	176
MATTHEWS, MR DAVID , Acting Deputy Director-General, Education Directorate.....	176
PARKINSON, MR ANDREW , Executive Group Manager, Business Services, Education Directorate	176
WATSON, MR MARTIN , Executive Group Manager, Board of Senior Secondary Studies	176

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 10.01 am.

BERRY, MS YVETTE, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation, Minister for Women

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HAMILTON, MS JUDITH, Acting Executive Group Manager, School Improvement, Education Directorate

WATSON, MR MARTIN, Executive Group Manager, Board of Senior Secondary Studies

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to this public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank the education minister and officials for attending today. I understand that you have each been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could each of you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Ms Berry: Yes, I do.

Ms Haire: Yes, I agree.

Mr Matthews: I have read and understood the privilege statement.

Ms Efthymiades: I have read and understand the privilege statement.

MRS DUNNE: Come on, guys.

THE CHAIR: Is that everyone?

MRS DUNNE: There are many more people up on the screen.

THE CHAIR: I have just noticed that. If you are each planning on contributing today, can you please say your name and whether you agree?

Mr Hawkins: I have read and understood the privilege statement.

Mr Huxley: I have read and understood the privilege statement.

Mr Parkinson: I have read and understood the privilege statement.

Ms Hamilton: I have read and understood the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: If we have missed anyone, please chime in later. I would like to remind you that the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and we are, of course, being webstreamed and broadcast live. Before we go into questions, minister, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to give?

Ms Berry: I am happy to go ahead with just taking questions.

THE CHAIR: Minister, what health advice or medical advice have you received throughout this period, particularly in relation to the safety of schools?

Ms Berry: Well, the health advice has been consistent that the schools are safe for students, but the advice is also for everybody to stay home. Taking that into account, there was, and still is, a sentiment amongst adults in our community about the health advice that at this stage that it continues to be safe for students at schools. But with large numbers of people moving throughout the city, there have been restrictions put in place to encourage people to stay at home. I guess that has always been the health advice, and that has not changed.

THE CHAIR: Did you receive any health advice at any point to say that schools were not safe for kids?

Ms Berry: I did when Lyneham High School had a positive diagnosis within its school community, and I spoke directly with the Chief Health Officer here in the ACT and asked for advice on the next step, once that diagnosis was made and confirmed for that school. I asked her to advise me on whether that school needed to be closed immediately, for how long and what needed to happen at that school as a result of that positive diagnosis.

THE CHAIR: Have you had any advice about the safety of staff at schools?

Ms Berry: The same advice for the general population—that social distancing, personal hygiene and respiratory hygiene should apply and that everybody should stay at home as much as they can.

THE CHAIR: Prior to, during and after the announcement that schools would reopen, what changed with the health advice that led you to make that decision?

Ms Berry: Sorry, can you go back and ask that again?

THE CHAIR: What changed with the health advice that led you to make the decision to reopen schools?

Ms Berry: In the ACT there is a lot of easing of restrictions across the community—and across the country—in line with the national cabinet's decision-making and conversations about a way forward. Particularly here in the ACT community, Canberrans have worked really hard together over the last eight weeks or so, and we

have been successful in doing a couple of things—first, flattening the curve, and now suppressing the virus here in the ACT. The advice still remains, from the Chief Health Officer, that social distancing, personal hygiene and respiratory hygiene need to continue, and that will continue until such time that medical and health experts are satisfied that there is a vaccine in place or other ways to manage and control this virus into the future.

So we do have a little bit to go, but in the ACT the public sentiment has also changed. In the ACT, people are feeling cautiously optimistic that they can start leaving their homes but are also continuing to maintain social distancing as much as possible and continuing with their own personal hygiene. So that advice has not changed; it continues. However, because of the hard work that Canberrans have done over the last eight weeks, we are now in a situation where restrictions have been eased across other parts of the community, and that provides confidence within our schools that there is more safety, particularly for teachers and parents, to attend our school sites.

THE CHAIR: And how were you able to keep staff in the hub schools safe during the height of the restrictions?

Ms Berry: Hub schools were also practising social distancing wherever it was practicable and also ensuring that there was personal hygiene carried out, as is required across the general community.

THE CHAIR: And so that was sufficient to keep them safe?

Ms Berry: I am not a medical expert, Mr Coe, but we have just followed the advice of the Chief Health Officer as much as we possibly can across the whole of the community, as does the general population.

THE CHAIR: True. In which case, if you are following that advice for the hub schools, why are you not following that advice for all the other schools?

Ms Berry: We are, and we will be.

THE CHAIR: How is it that you were keeping hub schools open and you could not have other schools open?

Ms Berry: It was decided that the hub schools were a way forward in navigating the education response to this international pandemic for a couple of reasons.

THE CHAIR: I am specifically talking about the health and medical advice here, not necessarily about education. How was it that a local school was not safe to open but a hub school was?

Ms Berry: No, I have never said that schools were not safe to open. What the ACT government was taking into consideration was the ability to provide education across all our schools and the ability to ensure that teachers, adults and parents felt safe coming to our schools and that we could actually have an education delivered in our schools. Remember that eight weeks ago we were in a very different place and it looked like we were going to be in this for a significant period of time—at least six

months, possibly longer. Now we know that it will be longer before we get a handle on a vaccine or another way to control this virus in our community. So we were preparing for the long haul. Our teachers were preparing for a long time in isolation and possibly more extreme restrictions at home, because that was the situation we were in eight weeks ago. That was the advice that we were getting for our general community, and you know this. Everyone knows this.

THE CHAIR: Yes, sure. But what we do not know, of course, is what advice you personally received along the way. That is the background to my question. You just said that you had never been told that the schools were not safe. Therefore, all local schools were safe throughout this period?

Ms Berry: Except for Lyneham High School, which had the positive diagnosis.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Ms Berry: That was something that we also had in our minds about large numbers of individuals coming together at that time. At that stage of our management and navigation through the virus pandemic, eight weeks ago, we were in a pretty dire place. So back then, yes, the advice was that students or young people were affected by the virus differently and were not necessarily vectors or transmitters of the virus to adults. However, we were still on a forward and upward trajectory with our diagnosis of COVID-19 in the ACT, and there was a fair amount—understandably—of anxiety within our community about people’s own safety, and understanding that everybody needed to do their thing to keep us all safe. And so that is what everybody was doing.

MRS DUNNE: Minister, going back to, I think, about 22 March, when there was an announcement made that we would go to three weeks worth of pupil-free days, what medical advice did you receive at that time that that was the course of action that you should take?

Ms Berry: Well, there was no medical advice that said that schools were not safe for students.

MRS DUNNE: Thank you. Can I also clarify: was there not already in place a protocol that if a school was identified with a COVID-19 case they would be automatically closed for a couple of days, for cleaning? Was there not already a protocol in place in late March when the case at Lyneham High was found?

Ms Berry: I will just have to see if there was actually action that was formalised through a protocol there.

MRS DUNNE: That was my understanding. Thanks.

Ms Berry: I can get some advice on that, Mrs Dunne. I have Katy Haire. Katy can talk to the question you just asked.

MRS DUNNE: Okay.

Ms Haire: Mrs Dunne, the protocol or the agreed approach is that, wherever there is a

case, we take the advice of the Chief Health Officer. In the instance of the case that was related to Lyneham High School, we immediately consulted with Dr Kerryn Coleman and sought her advice about whether the school should be closed, and she advised that it should. And so that is the process that we have in place.

MRS DUNNE: Can I just clarify: there is no standing protocol that, at a school where a COVID case is found, there is an automatic closure for cleaning? You go through the Chief Health Officer before you make that decision?

Ms Haire: We have a full procedure in place, Mrs Dunne, but the first step in it is to consult with the Chief Health Officer.

MRS DUNNE: Great. Okay, thank you.

Ms Berry: The Chief Health Officer knows about the case in the first place; they have done the contact tracing.

MRS DUNNE: Okay. I am done, thanks.

MS CHEYNE: My question is about out of school hours care, which seems to have been particularly complex over the last eight weeks, especially with the move to the hub schools. It does seem apparent that if a parent requires their child to be supervised during the school hours, they almost definitely need out of school hours care to be functional as well. Are you able to talk us through the interaction with the federal government on this, and what resulted in the out of school hours care continuing to be provided at the usual school when the hub model began?

Ms Berry: Yes. There were a number of conversations held with the federal government about the funding provisions that they had put in place as a response to the sector, as a stimulus and to save the organisations so that they would survive until we found a way out through the other side of this package. But it was not clear at the start. Everybody will have seen that there was a bit of confusion amongst the parents and the education and care sectors about what that funding would mean, who could apply for it, how much it was going to be, and whether or not it would continue to ensure that those organisations became viable. That included the JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme as well and whether or not those organisations could apply for that.

So, on 2 April, the government announced the early childhood education and care relief package. That came into effect on 6 April and was scheduled to be reviewed within a month. It was designed to work in conjunction with JobKeeper but, as everyone will recall, it was quite a confusing period about which organisations could apply for JobKeeper, how long employees had to be employed for, whether they were permanent or casual et cetera.

Of course, I had been talking with the early childhood education and care stakeholders and understood their concerns around viability and that this package was not necessarily going to be the thing that would save them at the end of the day. But it also meant that it was difficult for us in the ACT to consider what decisions were going to be made for the early childhood education and care sector, particularly for those who are working in out of school hours care across our schools—about their

continued viability regardless of what we did, but in conjunction with all of these packages that the federal government had designed.

During the first couple of weeks of the announcement, ACT government Education Directorate officials were trying to get some clarity on behalf of the sector—and the sector was as well—about what would apply, how it would be rolled out across the community and what it actually meant. So there was a significant amount of work being done in that space just to get some clarity before anyone even knew what a possible way forward could be. That did contribute to the decision-making that the ACT government was making at the time because it was very unclear—and very much a moving feast—as we were trying to get our heads around what the discussion points were. I can probably ask Deb to give some detail on the communications that she has had with the commonwealth government.

Ms Efthymiades: I think, minister, you characterised it pretty clearly. There was an announcement on 2 April and then implementation commenced on 6 April, and there was no clarity for anyone at that point. We had numerous considerations, including correspondence et cetera, with the commonwealth to seek clarification, particularly with questions from the sector, and including out of schools hours care. So the options that were on the table, I guess, were to see whether out of school hours care could be delivered by providers at the hubs.

While they were open to that, what became clear over time was that their funding was capped at an enrolment of 50 per cent of the enrolments that they had had pre-COVID. I think the reference period was early March. They were only going to be funded to 50 per cent of the places that they had had in early March, which meant that all the students moving into the hub could not automatically be accommodated. They could not take on new enrolments beyond that cap because they would not be funded et cetera. That was one of the paths we were exploring to see whether we could have before to after school hours on site, in one setting, for families.

Then, as the transport piece moved forward, the solution of transporting students from their home schools to the hub sites became a really viable one and the preferred model for transport. So, suddenly, the opportunity to have students engaging with their out of school hours care at their home school became a really valuable option for families because, firstly, they were just using the usual process of getting their child to their own home school initially. They could participate in their before school care. They would be transported to the hub. They would be transported back to the hub and participate in after school hours care. They were doing their before and afters in an environment that is familiar and is closer to home, where there were existing relationships with providers et cetera. There was the added benefit that those numbers staying in their before and after school care at their home schools added to the viability for all of the providers at those settings.

It had to be a bit of an iterative thing, because the commonwealth's 50 per cent had not been clear initially. As it got clarified, it was clear that the hub school out of school hours care did not become the best option for families or providers. They could not deliver on it. Therefore, the home one had all those other benefits and became the viable option. Does that answer the question, Ms Cheyne?

MS CHEYNE: Yes, it does. The bit I am next curious about is this: as that clarity seemed to become apparent by about mid-April, and school was returning after the Anzac Day long weekend, why was the transport not available on day one of the hub model?

Ms Berry: It was mostly due to registrations. We had to just clarify and confirm registrations with parents and families. We needed to understand which children were going to be where, so that we could very carefully account for them during their travel between schools—as they arrive and as they leave. Those checks were really clear and in place all the way through the travel between schools. So we needed to have registrations. We needed to understand how many students were coming so that they could be properly staffed.

The other thing that is important to note around the announcement on the early childhood education and care stimulus package was that education ministers had met with the federal education minister on 27 March, and we had all agreed at that meeting to set up an early childhood education and care task force to consider a way forward. Unfortunately, the announcement was made before we got a chance to meet, and none of us was aware of the announcement or got to talk through some of the issues that had been raised with us from the early childhood sector. So it ended up being a little bit confusing. I know that that has been the case along the way through all of this. Nobody has done this before, so I am not necessarily blaming anyone for the confusion, but it did mean that we had to change our tactics and change the strategy that we thought we had in place at the start, because things were changing and moving federally as well.

MS CHEYNE: This is my final question on that. I appreciate that things are much smoother now and that communications have been very good in the last few weeks. It seems that there is a lot of confidence in how the models are working, but on that Anzac Day long weekend there seems to have been quite a bit of confusion even between the schools and the parents. I am just curious about how the communications were working generally between the directorate, the schools and principals and the teachers?

Ms Berry: Again, it was all very last minute because we were trying to nail down some clarity around the federal government's announcement so that we could have a way forward for the sector, because the sector could not operate unless it was viable. There was no point in them doing that. I will ask Ms Haire to talk about that communication, how it evolved and how it moved forward.

Ms Haire: Thank you for the reflection that over the last couple of weeks things did become clearer. We are hearing from schools and from parents and students about how the hub schools are going. I do agree with you; I think that in retrospect we probably extended the time for registrations a little too long. We had a very strong desire to ensure that there would be a place for every child. In an effort to do that, we extended the time for registrations a couple of times, and we ended up extending them right up until the Thursday before the long weekend began.

We did continue to receive registrations during that time. That meant that, despite very, very long hours and efforts from the staff in the directorate, we could not contact

all the parents on Thursday and Friday, and we did have to have some communication with parents over the Anzac Day weekend. We were determined that we would contact every single parent who had put in a registration request but, because we kept it open for that period of time, it was just too large a task to do on the Thursday and Friday.

I do think, in retrospect, it was a difficult balance. If we had set an earlier date for closing the registrations it might have meant that some children or families who needed the service would have felt they could not access it, and we did not want to have that. But, on the other hand, it did mean that we were contacting parents on the weekend. The staff were contacting the parents. The senior team and I were there with the staff. Parents responded very well to that. They were very understanding and they appreciated the personal contact, but we acknowledge that that was very close to the first day of school and so it did cause some concern for families up to the point when they got their phone call. We understand that once the parents got their phone call and the email from us, they were very comfortable about the arrangements that were being made for their children.

THE CHAIR: Can you just clarify: how many calls were made?

Ms Haire: Mr Coe, hundreds of calls were made over that time. I would have to come back to you on the precise number. We had people working full time. We did not have staff in on Anzac Day—on the Saturday—but we had staff in all day Sunday and Monday making those calls, as well as Thursday and Friday. We sent emails to all of the families as well. In total, we contacted the over 2,000 parents who registered their children.

MS LE COUTEUR: I am interested in how you are going to get contact with the kids who do not come back to school. I imagine there are going to be some families who feel it is just not safe—their kids or their families may have particular medical issues—or, conversely, there may be kids who just have lost contact with school and it is going to be very hard to get them back. What are you going to do about this issue?

Ms Berry: Yes, there is no doubt that parents will make decisions about whether or not they return to school, based on their own comfort and on health advice as well. But also there might be families where they or their children might have high risks. So, yes, I understand that there will be a number of families who need to stay home. Teachers may need to stay home for the time being if they are in that higher risk category or if they have children who are in that higher risk category.

The Education Directorate have worked very hard to ensure that they have a very clear engagement process to make sure that students and families are continually engaged along the way. I know that there will be challenges for some students returning who do not fall into those categories—those who might have disengaged a little bit more over this period of time. But teachers know them—and know them really well—and know the families really well. During this period of time, the one-on-one contact with families and with those students has often increased because of the delivery of remote education for some students and families. That has been a really positive thing. But there is a clear process around how to continue to talk with

students who are not engaging at school or not engaging at school through this period and how we are going to continue to engage them and their families in their education. Who could talk to that? Who could talk to being a bit more about flexible—

Ms Haire: Ross could talk to that.

Ms Berry: Ross Hawkins, could you talk a bit more about the student engagement work?

Mr Hawkins: Yes, thank you, minister. Ms Le Couteur, thank you for your question. We have been working with a range of our vulnerable families across this process. That comes to those that may have medical conditions and cannot attend, but also where there might be vulnerabilities around issues such as domestic violence. We have been doing close work with CSD around how we provide those forms.

We are looking at how our schools help support our parents. We are tracking attendance on a daily basis to make sure, effectively, that there is a sense of that roll-marking, to watch what is taking place within our data. Then schools will be reaching out with the supports that they would typically do during normal school time. The directorate sits as a kind of backstop to that, to look at what further supports we can put in place for those families. There are quite significant supports that we have had in place over this period, in the reach-out to families, both in terms of the technical components—the devices and the IT—and also in terms of emotional and social support that is needed in checking in with people that might be vulnerable during this time.

MS LE COUTEUR: Where children are at home because of medical needs, are you going to be continuing with the online learning? How are they going to continue to learn?

Mr Hawkins: Yes, absolutely. Obviously, next week will be the first week where some of our cohorts start to return. Some of our families have flagged with us that they cannot do that, so we will be looking at the range of supports that we can put in place to support schools to support our families. There will be remote learning available. We are also looking at some further centrally curated resources we can make available to families who cannot attend. That is particularly important in that P-2 age, where there would be a degree of support from the school, but looking at how we continue to support families with resources that they might need, supporting those very young children.

MR PETTERSSON: The flipside of that question is: we have just talked about students returning to school. What will happen for teachers that might not be able to return to school because of a chronic health condition?

Ms Berry: The same will apply for now. I will ask Ms Haire to take you through a bit of the process that is in place for that. Of course, some of our teachers fall into the higher age groups, who are more at risk, but some of them might have a health issue which puts them into that category as well. We will work with teachers about what that looks like and how remote education can continue for them from their homes. I will ask Ms Haire to give you some more detail on that.

Ms Haire: Mr Pettersson, as the minister said earlier, in setting up the schools so that the adults are safe from the risks of transmission, we are putting in place all of the hygiene and behavioural requirements that come from the advice from both the AHPPC and the more detailed advice that our Chief Health Officer has given us. We also know that some of our staff fall into those vulnerable categories that you are talking about. That includes staff who are aged over 70, staff who are over 65 and have a chronic medical condition or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who are over 50 and have a chronic medical condition or have compromised immune systems.

At each school the principals are working through whether any of their staff fall into any of those vulnerable categories. We are offering those staff the opportunity to work flexibly, which might be, as the minister suggested, supporting some of the children who are not able to come back to school or carrying out other tasks that do not put them at risk of infection.

That is a process that we are going through right now. We have the age data, so we know the age of the teachers. We do not, for obvious privacy reasons, hold a database that lists whether our staff have chronic medical conditions. That is something that we are doing on a school-by-school basis. A responsibility that we take very seriously is to ensure that those staff who are in the vulnerable category are offered an opportunity to do work that does not put them at risk.

MR PETTERSSON: In regard to attendance at schools, as schools transition back to normal learning, it was flagged before that some parents have reached out to say that they will not be returning like normal. Do you have any suggestions as to the size of that cohort that will not be returning back to school like normal?

Ms Berry: I think we will just have to wait and see. It will be on a day-by-day basis. We will have to wait and see which parents turn up, and do what we can to reassure the community about what we are doing within our schools to ensure that they and their children will be safe. We will continue to encourage them to follow the health advice on social distancing. A lot of that planning is already happening within our schools to ensure that, with drop-offs, there are not large numbers of adults congregating around school entrances—drop and leave, and do not hang around for too long. All of those kinds of instructions, advice and plans are being developed by schools now, based on their physical layouts, and they are being communicated to parents and students as well.

MR PETTERSSON: Looking back, do you have any data on what school attendance was as this pandemic picked up speed, as well as on how engaged students have been as they learn online?

Ms Berry: The data might have changed a bit but, from memory, students were starting to be withdrawn from schools leading up to around 22 March. Student attendance at schools was starting to decline, and it was dropping every day up to 22 March, when we made the decision to go pupil free. On 16 March it was at 85 per cent; then it continued to go down to the Friday before the 22nd, when it was at 81 per cent.

In addition to that, of course, we had teachers in those higher risk categories—age or chronic health issues—who were taking leave from school because they were following the health advice for their own safety and wellbeing. We were already facing a real challenge in managing how we would continue education on school campuses, produce a remote education delivery and try and do the two at the same time, and that just was not going to work.

MR PETTERSSON: What about in regard to online engagement or attendance for online learning?

Ms Berry: I will get those numbers for you. That is, again, fluid because schools have operated a bit flexibly, depending on the student cohort. I will ask Ms Haire to give you some of that detail.

Ms Haire: We are modifying our attendance system and schools are still taking rolls. We do not have that data available yet, but we are continuing to take rolls while students are learning remotely. What we do know from looking at other indicators as well, from looking at the numbers of students logging in on the Google Meet platform, is that there is a very high level of engagement, as well as through the formal attendance records.

We are also, obviously, tracking the attendance of students at the safe and supervised sites. As was previously noted, the comfort and confidence in those sites is meaning that we are getting increased numbers each day. On Tuesday we had nearly 2,300 students attending, which is about a thousand more students than were attending on the first day. We are tracking both of those delivery models.

THE CHAIR: With regard to the roll, that is an electronic system, so you get that data pretty much live?

Ms Berry: No, it is a combination. There is the Google from home and there are students getting rollcalls at schools as well. There are a couple of datasets that are not quite working together yet.

Ms Haire: I would have to pass to Mr Hawkins if you would like a very detailed answer, Mr Coe. We have set up a mirror system of our attendance and we have sent out new instructions to the schools on how to keep attendance while students are remote. We are working through that because we consider that it is very important to have that information. I can pass to Mr Hawkins, if you like.

THE CHAIR: No, that is okay. Mrs Dunne has a question.

MRS DUNNE: I have a brief question which I hope I can get a brief answer to because I am very conscious that these answers are going on for seven or eight minutes at a time. Minister, what particular support has been given to students in learning support units, including those that are not in the cohorts that are coming back early?

Ms Berry: For those students who are staying at home?

MRS DUNNE: No, the ones who cannot come back because they are not in an age cohort that is in the early return to school.

Ms Berry: The LSUs in the special schools?

MRS DUNNE: No, LSUs in mainstream schools.

Ms Berry: Yes, we can give you some advice on that.

MRS DUNNE: Brief and succinct advice, please.

Ms Haire: Mrs Dunne, in general, the students in LSUs are returning along with their year cohort, as you have said. All of the students who are currently attending a hub school will go straight back to their home school from Monday. We did have a higher proportion of LSU students who were in the hub schools. Quite a large proportion of them will go straight back to their home school on Monday. Schools are reaching out to parents and, if parents have particular concerns about a child, we are encouraging them to contact their school.

MRS DUNNE: Would it be fair to say that LSUs are open for everybody—

Ms Berry: Yes.

MRS DUNNE: irrespective of their age group, beginning Monday?

Ms Berry: Yes.

MRS DUNNE: In their home school?

Ms Berry: Yes.

MRS DUNNE: Thanks, chair. That is my quick question answered quickly.

MR PETTERSSON: I have a couple of questions about the rollout of Chromebooks. Is there some underlying reason that the rollout is cut off at grade 4 as opposed to going to years 3, 2 and 1?

Ms Berry: A couple of things occurred. The ACT government made the commitment to have Chromebooks for senior secondary students from 2016, so that happened. We were the only state or territory in the country that had the ability to move very quickly to remote education because of that delivery. I know that other states and territories are now very seriously considering that, given the world that we are in.

With years 4, 5 and 6, because of the way the education is delivered for that particular age cohort, as the remote education was being developed it was important that they also had access to a device. We collected and loaned out the devices that we had across schools and purchased a bunch more. We bought 2,000 more Chromebooks to provide to years 4, 5 and 6 students. For those families who did not have any device at home and needed a device, that was provided for P-3 students as well. The

government purchased wi-fi dongles and Telstra offered free wi-fi, which we delivered to around 600 families who did not have it and who needed access to wi-fi.

Overall, in the ACT, with our response in a digital world, we were able to achieve that much quicker and in a more equitable way than the rest of the country because we had made the decisions around Chromebook provision earlier. And good on Telstra for coming on board as well. They provided free wi-fi in a number of states and territories—thousands and thousands of SIM cards across the country. That was welcome support from Telstra for families who did not have access previously.

MR PETTERSSON: Is the rollout to years 4, 5 and 6 a permanent rollout, or when we go back to more traditional schooling will there be a readjustment of Chromebooks?

Ms Berry: Those Chromebooks were loaned out to only those year groups at this stage. They will be returned; I think some schools have already asked for those to be returned when they come back to the schools.

THE CHAIR: I have a question about college; in particular, about reduced hours or reduced lines for college students. Could you please confirm that that is the case? What is the rationale for that and what will the impact be on students' education?

Ms Berry: I will ask Martin Watson, the board chair of BSSS, to provide you with some detail on that.

THE CHAIR: Sure. I should note that we have more questions from my colleagues, so I would ask that the answers be as succinct as possible, noting that it is a meaty subject. That would be appreciated.

Mr Watson: My understanding from the ACT public colleges is that schools are focused on providing opportunity for kids, both in person and particularly remotely, engagement with structured learning activities. Rather than looking at it from the point of view of hour by hour in class, it is about looking at it more flexibly so that students are engaged in the right amount of learning and have access to assessment, regardless of whether they are at school or not.

That has meant a number of adaptations in terms of the amount of assessment and the style of assessment. By using a range of online capacities that have been provided by the directorate, kids have had fantastic access to their teachers live, and prerecordings and a range of educational artefacts, which means there has been very good continuity of the delivery of learning, even though students have been at home.

You also need to understand that, through board policy, schools have a lot of flexibility in terms of adjustments they can make for individual students in given circumstances so that no student will be disadvantaged.

THE CHAIR: What is the rationale and what is the reason why normal lines cannot continue?

Mr Watson: I can answer that or I can throw to someone in the directorate.

Ms Haire: I am happy to pick that up. Mr Coe, we have been working with the colleges on the arrangements that they are making. Obviously, the advice from the BSSS, from Martin, about how to ensure that students are not disadvantaged and can continue their learning, particularly for those students in year 12, is really important. What I can be really clear about is that all students will be welcomed back on campus from Monday—

THE CHAIR: I am particularly after why it is that you cannot do normal lines.

Ms Haire: Schools are choosing different ways to deliver the content to their students. I will not take up the time of the committee by going through each of the colleges, but we have worked with each of them—

THE CHAIR: Specifically, why would a school say, “We’re not going to have all the normal classes”?

Ms Haire: The driver behind the way the colleges are choosing to go back to on-campus learning is to ensure that the students can pick up and continue from where they are right now. The teachers have prepared and have a range of materials ready for online learning which can quickly be turned into a blend of online support and face to face, and that is what—

THE CHAIR: Obviously, that is not the best-case scenario because if that was the best-case scenario and that was the optimal way of delivering education that would be the usual practice. Why is it that some schools need to cut hours a day off a child’s education in terms of structured classes?

Ms Haire: It is probably a difference between the way schools are timetabling, which does not and will not translate into students receiving less of their education, less of their teachers’ time or different content. It is about the way in which they are ensuring continuity between the period that the students have been learning online and segueing them back, but it is not about—

THE CHAIR: I still do not understand why you cannot have classes as per normal. I have seen timetables that only go from 9 am to 1 o’clock and then stop. Why would that be the case? I understand that it is, but why?

Ms Haire: It is probably the difference perhaps between a timetable and the availability of teachers to work with students on their work. The reports are that there has been more one on one and individualised work going on for our senior students, and that is one of the things that colleges want to maintain. It is also about ensuring that there is continuity as we lead up to the end of term 2, so that students do not have a further break in the way that they are being taught, particularly because they are working up to a range of assessments which will occur at the end of term 2.

MR COE: Are there enough teachers to deliver all of the classes as per a normal timetable?

Ms Haire: We have been working with the colleges, and a number of them do have

some staff who fall into the vulnerable category. The way the colleges are organising themselves is much more to do with ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for students, as well as—

THE CHAIR: Could this be the new model for the future? If this is the best-case—

Ms Berry: No, but there is definitely something positive that the education sector can learn from the delivery of remote education and how it was developed in the ACT; absolutely. None of that hard work will be thrown away or dismissed. It has been an incredible process in an extraordinarily short period of time, with many hours outside ordinary hours, to develop that program. It has been, for the most part, quite successful.

I would suggest, Mr Coe, that if you are being contacted by individuals who are concerned about their students, those students and those families should get in touch with their schools to work out an outcome that works best for them. That is the way forward here, and that is what we are encouraging everyone to do, just to make sure that they stay in touch—

THE CHAIR: There is still a role for representatives to advocate as well.

Ms Berry: Sorry, I could not hear that because you were talking over me. What was that?

THE CHAIR: There is still a role for the representatives to advocate to the education minister. Mrs Dunne has a supplementary question on this. In addition to what has been provided, could you please provide on notice a summary of the different approaches being taken by each college with regard to the delivery of classes at the moment?

Ms Berry: We will do our very best, Mr Coe, but that process is still going ahead, as far as planning for students' return is concerned. We will do our very best to get you all of the information that we have available from those colleges in as short a period of time as we can manage.

THE CHAIR: Sure; thank you. I imagine you must have that information; therefore I would imagine it is a collation exercise rather than a preparation exercise.

Ms Berry: Not necessarily, because we said at the start, when we were talking about students transitioning back to school, that colleges would have some flexibility across—

THE CHAIR: Yes, but you must know about that.

Ms Berry: Colleges have a fair amount of autonomy and know their students best. We have really left it up to the expertise of those colleges, their principals and their teachers to manage a transition that works best for their students.

Yes, of course, we always welcome advocacy from the opposition on issues that constituents might raise with you, but the advice has been consistent all along: the

best place for students and families to get support for their children is to go directly to their school and get the advice that works for them so that their schools can work out a plan for a way forward.

MRS DUNNE: I am surprised, minister, that you cannot, on notice, provide us with that information, seeing that the colleges are going back on Monday. In relation to the colleges going back, what is going to happen with AST trials and AST exams?

Ms Berry: Mrs Dunne, you should not be surprised. This is a complicated and ever-changing process, and navigating our way through an international health pandemic has not been a simple task. There is a significant amount of work happening overnight, pretty much, which should be happening over a year. We are continuing to work with our colleges and our schools to make sure our students get the best possible education through this incredibly difficult time that we are all—every single one of us—going through together. Martin Watson, do you want to talk about the AST?

Mr Watson: Thanks, minister. There are a couple of things to note about the AST. The board, through the office of the board and my team, are providing extensive information to schools so that they are able to put students through trial testing and through preparatory programs at the schools. That is a school-based activity led by principals and their staff. We are making sure that they have all of the resources that they need to do that—the range of questions, explanations, answers and things like that.

With the AST itself, we are planning at the moment for the AST to take place as per normal, given that that is possible. At the same time, we have developed a range of contingencies and we are receiving external help for the validation of all of those contingencies. Those would include a truncated, condensed test which would be a one-sit rather than a three-sit, a delay in when the test is et cetera. We have a lot of flexibility both with the timing and with the nature of the test, and we are working through those at the moment.

Schools in all sectors will be given an overview of how this might happen. I will be meeting with principals in about a week—all principals—to discuss this matter through teleconference, and the board will be giving me their blessing for all of our processes for the rest of the year.

I am extremely confident that kids will be appropriately prepared and that we will be able to offer the test. It is crucial that we do; it is also great that we are able to focus on this statistical moderating test for our system rather than at this stage have hundreds of content-based exams to be administered. We are in a very good position flexibly to support all students, including those in the public colleges.

MS LE COUTEUR: It sounds like you have the testing sorted, which is great. My question is: with the learning for kids in college, particularly in year 12, how much do you think their actual learning will have been impacted by this?

Mr Watson: I will talk about that in two ways, and as quickly as I can; I know that time is short. With preparation for the AST, it is not a content exam; it is critical skills and thinking, academic. It is preparation for test style et cetera which is the important

thing, so that will be able to continue, based on how each school goes.

In terms of the learning, the way things are assessed in the AST is on a school-by-school basis. Students will be compared with students in their own content and their own cohort at school, which protects the students from being impacted negatively by what happens anywhere else, jurisdiction or school. That is actually great. It is almost as if we designed the system for the current circumstances.

In terms of the learning as it relates to their assessment, they will be assessed only on the basis of what they have had the opportunity to learn, not things that they may have missed. At the same time, can I say I have seen no real evidence that students at this stage have been deprived of learning opportunity and exposure, to this date, which is extremely gratifying from my position. As I said, schools are able to adapt their assessment so that it suits those students in that school, given board guidelines, and relates specifically to the learning that they have done.

Ms Haire: Ms Le Couteur, if it is helpful, there was some research published just last month by Professor John Hattie which looked at the impact of disruption on student learning. One of his findings was that the disruption of the Christchurch earthquake showed that student performance increased during remote learning, and those students went on to do exceptionally well in their end of school exams. He said it is about the quality of the teaching, not the time that is spent, going back to the quality of the remote learning that Martin has referred to.

MS CHEYNE: My question is about communication with teachers generally, particularly during this crisis. There have obviously had to be some very major decisions made and communicated. Are teachers or principals given advance notice of those decisions or is everyone finding out at about the same time? Is it the directorate that communicates with everybody or does the directorate communicate with principals and it is up to principals to communicate with teachers?

Ms Berry: As has been everybody's experience in responding to this international health pandemic, sometimes leading up to now things have moved very fast; so governments have needed to act quickly, and sometimes that has meant that consultation in a normal world or a normal environment has not been as great as it could be. However, that is not to say that that consultation did not occur. It did occur in many ways through peak stakeholder groups—for teachers through their union, through the school principals association, with the Catholic and independent schools associations, the Education Directorate and the P&C Council as well.

Over the last four weeks there has been a significant amount of very detailed communication to all of those stakeholder groups about the way forward. Of course, because situations change very quickly, often people will feel that they have not been consulted. But these circumstances are extraordinary and sometimes decisions have needed to be made and communicated in the best possible way under the circumstances, for the circumstances that are being faced by us all.

It is the same as when we started this journey eight or nine weeks ago, when decisions were made by government about different things that were taking place, and the restrictions. Those decisions were made and the community was told about them.

Consultation is important in general, but sometimes decisions need to be made very quickly, based on the best possible advice that you have in front of you and with consultation at least with the peak and representative bodies.

MS CHEYNE: I appreciate the extraordinary amount of consultation that has gone on, and in a very big environment, but when decisions are made, how are they communicated? Does the directorate send out a dot-point list to principals to share with teachers or does every teaching staff member get a media release or something? I am curious about the ways, when a decision is made such as going to hubs or returning to face-to-face learning, that teachers are finding out?

Ms Berry: Probably multiple avenues, including via their school principals and directly from the Education Directorate or from their representative organisations.

Ms Haire: That is right. Generally, what we have done, and with the most recent decisions, for example, last week, we let the school principals know first. I then sent an email to all staff in the directorate, including all of the teachers, which they got at 8.30 last Friday morning. It is part of our protocol that we prefer not to email people too early or too late at night. We let them know as soon as possible in the working day, on Friday morning. But we had already briefed the principals the night before, after the decision was made.

THE CHAIR: That is all of the time we can spend today on this subject, noting the one-hour limit. Thank you very much for appearing today, minister, and officials. I thank everyone in the directorate that has been working so hard over this period and I thank the staff of all of the schools who are so committed to our kids' education. You will be sent a copy of this transcript. Please review it and ensure that it is accurate. Again, thank you for appearing today.

Ms Berry: Thank you.

CROSS, MS REBECCA, Coordinator-General, Whole of Government (Non-Health)
Response to COVID-19

THE CHAIR: Ms Cross, thank you very much for joining us today. On behalf of the committee, I would like to congratulate you on your appointment and thank you for the work that you are doing. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement that you have been sent?

Ms Cross: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: I also remind you that the proceedings are being recorded for Hansard, for transcription purposes, and we are being webstreamed. Before we go to questions, do you have an opening statement that you would like to make?

Ms Cross: No, I do not. I would like to mention that I do from time to time have sound problems at this end. If the video cuts out on my computer, I will try and dial in on my phone.

THE CHAIR: Could you please advise how your appointment came about and what it is that you will be concentrating on?

Ms Cross: Certainly. I was appointed to the role of Coordinator-General for the Whole of Government (Non-Health) Response to COVID-19 on 30 March. If you think about COVID-19 having broad health, social and economic impacts, my responsibilities are on the social and economic side and the Chief Health Officer is responsible for the health side. I coordinate, at a whole-of-government level, all of the non-health matters and make sure that what we are doing there aligns well with what the Chief Health Officer is doing.

THE CHAIR: Are there comparable positions in all other jurisdictions?

Ms Cross: I do not think it would be true to say they are exactly the same, but there are similar arrangements. Most jurisdictions stand up arrangements under their emergency plans and there are similar arrangements, although I do not know of anyone that has exactly the same role as me. I will be talking to the Northern Territory group next week, to look at how what we are doing aligns with what they are doing and to see if there are any lessons we can learn from their arrangements. We will have similar conversations with other jurisdictions as the needs arise.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to directly make decisions yourself or do you have to provide advice to either the minister or a statutory office holder in order to give authority to your decisions?

Ms Cross: I am not a decision-maker. I report to the security and emergency management committee of cabinet. That is my reporting line. By and large, I would describe my role more as a coordinator than a decision-maker.

THE CHAIR: Are you responsible for consulting externally or is it primarily about internal government coordination?

Ms Cross: It is largely about internal government coordination. One of the principles that we have been using during COVID-19, and in fact during any emergency, is that, where possible, if we have existing mechanisms that work well, we continue to use them rather than create new ones. Most of the external consultation would be through our normal arrangements, whether that is with the business community or community service organisations. We would try as much as possible to use existing mechanisms rather than create new ones, which can create confusion.

MS CHEYNE: I appreciate that your role is that of coordinator-general; so it is a coordinating role. Do you have staff that are reporting to you? Are you overseeing the PICC? I am trying to picture how it is all working.

Ms Cross: There are a couple of main arrangements which we have put in place which I will mention; hopefully, that will give you a bit of a picture. We have the normal group of directors-general, which has been expanded to include other key leaders of some of our key agencies—ACT Policing, emergency services, and a range of agencies. I am part of that group, so I am part of the conversations that are happening there, and we can make sure that any information from that group is flowing through appropriately to all of the other areas of government.

Sitting beneath that, we then have a new committee which has been established which has all of the deputy directors-general. There are two deputies on that group who work to me during COVID-19. One is looking after the commonwealth-state aspects, because of the important links into what is happening at national cabinet, and the other is responsible for all of the other COVID-19 work. Those two deputies work to me; then we have that broader group of all of the deputies, again, as a bit of a coordination mechanism.

The PICC works to the CHO, but they also have a reporting line to me, so that any of the non-health communications are being properly coordinated and managed. One of the arrangements which we have put in place is to have a daily coordination catch-up with the Chief Health Officer, the head of the Health Directorate, me, my two deputies and the head of our normal SEMSOG arrangement, and the PICC. Every day, all of those key people are checking in and making sure that we are clear on what needs to be done, that any issues can be resolved quickly and that we all have a clear understanding of what is coming up, because things have been moving very quickly during COVID-19.

MS CHEYNE: Who are the deputy directors-general who are reporting to you?

Ms Cross: Leesa Croke, who is in the cabinet and comm-state area, and Karen Doran, who, during the bushfires, was doing a lot of the work in the emergency services area.

MS CHEYNE: Ms Cross, are you and this team responsible for providing briefs or setting the ACT's position for the Chief Minister, ahead of national cabinet meetings?

Ms Cross: We are involved in that process. Obviously, a lot of the briefing ahead of national cabinet is around the health position and the advice of the AHPPC, so it would be the Chief Health Officer and the Minister for Health that are briefing on that.

Similarly, if there were decisions on schools, it would be the education minister and the Director-General of Education. I am more coordinating and making sure with the cabinet office that all of the right people are there, rather than, on those sorts of issues, providing advice directly. There may be other issues on which I provide advice directly, so it really depends on what the issue is.

MS LE COUTEUR: It is hard to get my head around how all this is working. My first question is: you are clearly doing a lot of coordination. What is the balance between coordinating and action? Are you largely a redirection agency?

Ms Cross: No. It varies by issue. For example, when the government announced the jobs for Canberrans fund, I identified someone to lead that work, but I was involved in all the early work to get the fund established, to make sure we had good policy and guidelines, to make sure we could find the first 150 jobs. I worked with the team that were working on the IT solutions—very direct involvement in the jobs for Canberrans fund—and then preparing the brief to the Chief Minister and to cabinet to get the arrangements for that fund signed off. In that sort of example, I was quite engaged and hands on.

In other areas where there is another obvious need, really I am just making sure that that work is progressing, that all of the right information is flowing and that there is good decision-making and process around that work. Again, it varies according to the issue.

MS LE COUTEUR: I assume that you are the early warning system for emerging problems?

Ms Cross: Yes. Because I have got access to the range of meetings and the range of discussions, whether they are at national cabinet level or whether they are within ACT government, and because I am meeting daily with representatives of every directorate—and other people have the same sort of overview—I have a very good overview of what is happening, which would help identify issues if they emerged.

MS LE COUTEUR: One question which I sincerely hope has not emerged but which I have read about is that in America there are calls for new legislation to reduce liability, particularly for hospitals but also other places, for COVID-19 infections. The government has been asked to give liability to people in hospitals doing surgery, businesses that open for COVID-19. Is that something that is a thing in the ACT or Australia at all or are you already set up so that you do not have to worry about those issues?

Ms Cross: I do not know the position in America. I would prefer to know a little more about it and see if there are any parallels here in the ACT.

MS LE COUTEUR: I do not think we have to do anything. Basically, what they are saying is that if you open your business—and hospitals are where it has been most of an issue in the US—if you follow the rules and one of your clients or patients gets sick shortly after that with COVID-19 can they sue you and say, “You made me sick,” or can you rely on saying, “The government said that if I had 1.5 metres or I disinfected, whatever, I’m sorted. You can’t hassle me. You can hassle someone

else”?

Ms Cross: That question might be better directed to workplace health and safety—

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately the connection is dropping out. Are you able to perhaps turn your camera off but leave the microphone on? That may well result in at least better audio quality.

Ms Cross: Yes. Does this help you? Can you hear me better now?

THE CHAIR: Much better, thank you.

Ms Cross: Great. I was going to say that it is actually not my area of expertise. I think it comes into areas of workplace health and safety and the obligations of employers. Would it be possible to take that on notice so that I can make sure I get the right technical advice for you?

MS LE COUTEUR: Sure. I was not particularly thinking about obligations just as employers but obligations to your customers, your clients. Your restaurant has just opened. You come in; you find that three days later you got COVID-19 there. They followed the rules. Can you sue them?

Ms Cross: I think, because this is a matter of public health and safety, they apply to your staff and members of the public. I would need to check; I am sorry.

MRS DUNNE: I would like to get a more in-depth feel for the reach of your remit. Are you the one-stop shop for everything non-health in relation to COVID? In addition to two deputy directors-general, what staff structure do you have?

Ms Cross: I do not think it would be fair to say that I am the one-stop shop for everything non-health. There are a number of matters which are dealt with by individual directorates—for example, arrangements for the transport system and buses. If they do not have impacts on other directorates then they would just be handled in the normal way by Transport Canberra.

There are a number of issues which are still being handled through the normal mechanisms. My role is more when there are whole-of-government implications and making sure that people that are working on COVID-19-related issues have access to all the information that they need so that they can manage their own work appropriately. It is connecting people up; it is not coordinating everything that is being done.

In terms of my staff, other than the two deputy directors-general who report to me but also have their other responsibilities, I have an executive officer and my executive assistant. I can tap into resources in other directorates if needed, but those people do not report to me.

MRS DUNNE: I am still a little unclear about what the coordination role is. You are saying whole of government. What sort of whole of government? Apart from jobs for Canberra what sort of whole-of-government issues are you dealing with?

Ms Cross: We have been looking at what are the different things that the government needs to plan for in COVID-19. If you look at some of the social impacts, you might look at things like community resilience, you might look at how we are looking after vulnerable Canberrans, and you might look at our community services sector and how well they are being supported in COVID-19. In the economic area you might look at what are we doing for which business: how are we going to manage business as we come through COVID-19 and support their recovery? You might be looking at what are some of the services, what would we do if some services collapsed and how would we maintain services? There are a range of things which are non-health related, and I am responsible for making sure that we are considering all those issues and that the right people are looking at what we may need to do in those areas.

Another important part of my role is just making sure that, when there is crossover between some of the health work and those areas, that is happening smoothly and there is no duplication of effort and people are clear on what needs to happen. The Chief Health Officer, for example, might need to be considering what would be the situation where there are mass fatalities. Some of that is a health issue; some of that is other parts of government. It is just making sure that all that work goes smoothly and that we have good decision-making, good governance and no inefficiencies. But it is not actually doing that work myself.

MRS DUNNE: It is bossing other people around and telling them what they should do?

Ms Cross: No. I suspect that, having worked in social policy all my life, it would be better to say it is working with other people to see if we can get the best possible outcome by working together closely. I should say that, in that respect, every directorate has been incredibly generous, when there is work that has needed to be done, in identifying really good people that can work on these things collaboratively.

MRS DUNNE: Are you part of the conversations with particular sectors? I will give an example of, say, the commercial property sector, which has been waiting for advice on rates waivers and rates reductions for some time. Have you been part of that conversation and have you been part of encouraging, say, the revenue office to move along with finalising those arrangements?

Ms Cross: No. As I said at the beginning, one of the principles has been that if we have existing mechanisms that work well we should continue to use them. Rather than create a new mechanism that involves me, that would be led by the people who normally deal with those issues. I am certainly aware of it, but I am not part of those conversations.

MR PETERSSON: I was wondering if you could comment on how operations across the ACT government have been affected by a large number of staff working from home and if some directorates have been particularly affected, more so than others.

Ms Cross: Other than occasionally my Webex dropping out, which can be slightly frustrating, my experience is that the working from home arrangements have gone

very well and that, by and large, most directorates have the bulk of staff who can work from home. There have been some areas where it seems that that works incredibly efficiently. Perhaps people are less distracted and can get more done. Obviously, we are all conscious that, for people working from home, sometimes it can be tricky because of having family, young children, there with them.

These are things which we have been working through. I would say it has actually been working very effectively and we have been very focused on providing support to people as they have adapted to this new environment. Most of that support is provided by individual directorates rather than by my role, but from everything I have seen—and from my experience when I was in the Community Services Directorate before this role—it has actually gone very smoothly, by and large.

MR PETTERSSON: Have you seen a difference between the directorates? You say that they have each got directorate-specific assistance. The crux of it is: is there a difference between the directorates?

Ms Cross: I will use Transport Canberra again. Obviously, their bus drivers cannot work from home, if you look at the proportion of their workforce that is working from home, it might look smaller, but if you look at the ones who are not in those frontline delivery roles I think you will find that it is pretty consistent with other directorates.

In the Community Services Directorate, what you can do with a policy area is slightly different to what you can do with child protection or Housing ACT. Each directorate really has tailored what they are doing to the services that they provide and the things which they are responsible for.

THE CHAIR: With regard to your scope, which Mrs Dunne asked about, you mentioned there is work that could be done in the business space and in various other portfolios or sectors. What coordination have you been doing to date?

Ms Cross: When you have a national cabinet meeting and decisions are taken—and I will use the most recent example, easing restrictions—some of the coordination work is just making sure that people are completely clear on the decisions that have been taken, that if we are changing the health directions all the people who will be impacted by that are aware of it. In some cases the health directions impact on private businesses; in others on government operations. It is about making sure that the PICC is actively engaged with all those people so that our communications about the changes are effective and targeting the right behaviours in the public and then making sure that we have got the right guidance for business.

I am not responsible for doing those things, but it is about making sure the right people are being pulled together and that the left hand and the right hand know what is happening so that we do not have any confusion and we communicate really effectively with the public and with business.

THE CHAIR: What role have you played with regard to communicating the decisions of national cabinet on education with the Education Directorate and how they have communicated with staff, students and families?

Ms Cross: Largely, that has been led by Education because they have existing mechanisms for communicating with parents, with teachers, with the community. They have been supported in that by the PICC, and I have been involved in a number of the meetings where it has been discussed so that if there was anything happening there we could make sure that the right people were involved.

But Education, for example, communicated directly with Transport Canberra about bus arrangements when we had the hub schools. They have been doing a lot of that themselves because they have got very well-established arrangements. I am just there if anything else is needed. They can call on me to pull other resources in. But in that instance it was largely done between Education and the PICC.

THE CHAIR: In what areas has your coordination really been required, in that things would have fallen over or would have stumbled had you not been there to coordinate?

Ms Cross: I am not sure that things would have stumbled or fallen over but, in terms of making sure things happened really smoothly and quickly, the one I would point to would be the jobs for Canberrans fund, because there were so many different directorates involved in identifying jobs. There was the policy and program work that needed to be done to have good guidelines and procedures in place. There was the ICT component so that we had an online system where people could readily register for the jobs, apply for the jobs. That was an area where I had the capacity to pull some people in from other directorates and form a team and make sure that all worked smoothly and that we had good decision-making, that we could get back to cabinet quickly, that we had good approval processes for the jobs. That is the sort of example where I had quite a large role.

A lot of the other work is just through the deputy director-general group, which is really the information sharing and the communication of what is going on, because things would become very inefficient if people were not fully informed, as things have been changing so rapidly. I think things are still moving very quickly, but particularly in the first weeks of this, when national cabinet was meeting three times a week, things were changing incredibly rapidly so that communication of what was going on, communication of decisions and tasking and just making sure everyone was in the loop, was probably a very critical function.

The other thing which I am now working on is really getting the work underway to look ahead, working with all directorates on those issues like community resilience, business recovery, making sure that we are not just being reactive but starting to look more strategically at what will happen over the next 12 or so months.

THE CHAIR: What role have you played coordinating with liquor licensing, planning, health, economic development et cetera with regard to the reopening of hospitality venues?

Ms Cross: That is being led by the area that normally deals with all those issues. There is a working group that has been set up that is looking at how we engage with businesses, what the approach will be in terms of providing business with assistance in working out how they reopen in a way which is COVID safe, looking at the compliance regime that goes around that, making sure that that fits in with the health

directions. There is a little working group that—

THE CHAIR: Are you chairing that working group?

Ms Cross: No. It is a subgroup. It has been set up as a subgroup. I am not chairing it, but from time to time—

THE CHAIR: You are on that working group?

Ms Cross: When I need to, I will join a meeting, but a lot of the detail work I do not need to be part of because that is stuff for which, as I said, there are existing mechanisms. I am there as needed.

THE CHAIR: Your position hangs off, you say, the subcommittee of cabinet?

Ms Cross: My position was established by cabinet.

THE CHAIR: Yes, but you are reporting to a subcommittee. Is that right?

Ms Cross: It is the security and emergency management committee of cabinet, which is normally set up during bushfires or any sort of emergency.

THE CHAIR: And that is all members of cabinet in that subcommittee, I guess?

Ms Cross: Yes, it is.

THE CHAIR: Do all the directors-general go along to that subcommittee of cabinet meeting as well?

Ms Cross: Yes, I think they do. Yes, they do.

THE CHAIR: And the Head of Service?

Ms Cross: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Can you clarify what is the PICC that you talk about?

Ms Cross: It is the Public Information Coordination Centre. Basically it is a mechanism which is always put in place—it was put in place during the bushfires as well—just to manage all the communication during an emergency response.

THE CHAIR: And what role were you doing before this appointment?

Ms Cross: I was the Director-General of the Community Services Directorate.

MS CHEYNE: I am curious about your oversight of food and other general supermarket supplies in the ACT, particularly supplies generally, and how that has changed over time and whether you have been talking with any of the major retailers about supply and demand and how that has been affecting Canberrans.

Ms Cross: Early on in the Community Services Directorate, and then in the very early days in this role, obviously we were looking at the food relief arrangements. There was a government announcement about that. That has been led by the Community Services Directorate. That was very specifically looking at vulnerable people and how we would make sure they were able to access food and other essential items.

Most of the discussions in terms of the broader issue of retail supply, as I understand it, have happened at the national level. There was a national coordination mechanism where the commonwealth in particular was talking with major retailers and looking at issues around not just supply but regulatory arrangements. My understanding of some of the issues around toilet paper was not that there was an insufficient supply but that they could not supply it quickly enough and the solution was to change some of the regulations around delivery hours so that toilet paper could be continually delivered until people stopped buying it.

A lot of that happened at the national level, rather than being something that I had involvement in. I can check what involvement we have had within the ACT, but I think most of it would have happened through that national coordination mechanism.

MS CHEYNE: We have heard that the relief network that was established for Canberrans has been working very well. Do you have a bit of an overview about what the demand has been for that? Has the demand increased or decreased over time? And are we able to meet demand? Are some people still missing out or are we well resourced to make sure that anyone who needs that food or emergency relief can get it?

Ms Cross: My understanding is that \$1.5 million was allocated for food relief support in the ACT and that since 1 April we have been delivering food relief hampers. I am not aware of any issues where people have not been able to access it and I am not aware of any issues where we have needed to seek additional funding. I can check this with the Community Services Directorate for you but, as I understand, that was up and running very quickly and I am not aware of any issues that have come up since then.

MS CHEYNE: Can you take on notice to check with them and just get a bit of an update and also about what the demand has been for that service over time?

Ms Cross: Happy to do that.

MS LE COUTEUR: My two questions basically follow on from Ms Cheyne's. First, not so much in terms of the Canberra relief network but in general, we have heard a lot about people who are not in a position to get either JobKeeper or JobSeeker because they are basically not Australian citizens but may have been here for some time. There is no centralised social security relief. Do you know how the ACT is going in terms of support for these people who are in the ACT?

Ms Cross: There are a couple of things I would mention. One is the jobs for Canberrans fund, where the priority for all those jobs goes to people who are not eligible for other forms of government assistance. That very specifically targets the people who are on temporary visas and who are not eligible for JobKeeper or

JobSeeker. When people apply, first and foremost we will seek to fill the jobs for that cohort before we look any further. Obviously, for these people, having access to work will be a really important aspect of how they carry on during COVID-19.

There was also, as I understand it, within the community support package that the government announced, \$300,000 provided to support asylum seekers and temporary visa holders. Obviously, as well, they would be eligible for food relief and other support through the range of community service providers who have been given additional funding during COVID-19. They are the key areas that I am aware of specifically targeting people who are not eligible for JobKeeper and JobSeeker.

MS LE COUTEUR: It was not quite what I was asking, because I was aware of most of those. Like the jobs for Canberrans, my understanding from press reports was that there were vastly more people applying for those jobs than the number of jobs that actually existed. There are an awful lot of international students. The question really was: what knowledge, if any, do you have of the unmet demand for people who are here in Canberra and basically do not have an income. and would the answer be that you do not have visibility of the unmet demand?

Ms Cross: I can find out for you the numbers of people who have registered on the jobs for Canberrans website who would fit that category, because we certainly have data on how many have said they are eligible for JobKeeper, JobSeeker, youth allowance or nothing. We could tell you how many of the people registered fit the category you are looking at. That is probably the best information I could get for you at the moment.

MS LE COUTEUR: The other question which is a supplementary to Ms Cheyne's about supply chains—and I fear I know the answer—is: have you been doing any work in terms of supply chains specifically into the ACT and not just the immediate things like food? I was rung up by the Red Cross, who postponed my blood donation because they are missing supplies and they cannot do blood donations. It is things like that; not the first level “Are we going to starve?” but “What else are we missing?”

Ms Cross: We are doing work around food security and just looking at that as a longer term issue. There has been a huge amount of consideration of personal protective equipment which has been a priority for a number of organisations—masks and gloves and hand sanitiser. There has been a lot of work done on that.

The only other one I am aware of is work on the flu vaccine to make sure that we had good supplies of the flu vaccine. I am not aware of anything else but, again, I can ask across government and see if anything further has been done. I was not aware of the issue with the Red Cross, but I can follow up on that for you.

MR PETERSSON: I want to clarify something you mentioned at the very beginning. You mentioned that your role was unique across Australia. Is that correct?

Ms Cross: I said I am not aware of anything that is exactly the same as mine. I think each state and territory has put in place their own arrangements. I am not aware of any that is exactly the same as mine.

MR PETTERSSON: Could you articulate what some of the differences between the roles of these people might be?

Ms Cross: I am talking to the Northern Territory, and I think they may have given powers to the head of their service and the head of their police force. I think they may have handled it in that way. In Victoria—again, I have not spoken to them—I understand they may have set up a committee of all their secretaries that is looking at the future directions in Victoria in response to COVID-19. We did a phone around early on to see if there were any roles the same as mine and did not find any, but I think each state and territory has put in place the mechanisms that work best for them. I can find out more for you if you are interested.

MR PETTERSSON: That would be interesting.

MRS DUNNE: I want to again drill down into your role. Can you tell the committee what coordinating function has taken up the most of your time?

Ms Cross: I think it would be the communication of decisions and tasking and making sure that people are all informed about decisions that have been taken and the work that is required to progress them. I would say that because there have been so many national cabinet meetings which have flowed through to a range of decisions in the ACT. The other one would be the constant communication with the Chief Health Officer to make sure that everything is properly aligned, efficient decision-making, efficient recordkeeping and efficient allocation of resources and no duplication or overlap. I would probably say they are the two elements that have taken the most time.

MRS DUNNE: Have you been involved in the communication of individual agency decisions to affected personnel and the public?

Ms Cross: No. I would be communicating with the directors-general and deputy directors-general in directorates to make sure—

MRS DUNNE: You are talking about internal communication?

Ms Cross: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Just as a follow-up from that, does the Chief Minister's directorate or the cabinet office or the Chief Minister's office communicate decisions of national cabinet?

Ms Cross: The decisions of national cabinet are then taken to the security and emergency management committee of cabinet. If you look at the most recent decisions of national cabinet on the framework for lifting restrictions, each jurisdiction can decide at what time and at what pace and which measures in each stage they will lift. There is a national cabinet agreement to a framework. There is then a separate decision-making process for how that will apply and at what speed in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: I understand that. I am talking about the communication. For instance, if national cabinet meets on a Friday morning—

Ms Cross: Then there would be a policy meeting in the afternoon.

THE CHAIR: But, before then, does somebody send around an email to all the directors-general or senior public servants saying, “At national cabinet today this was resolved”?

Ms Cross: As I said, there is a regular meeting of directors-general ahead of national cabinet. We would communicate what is on the agenda. Following national cabinet, we would communicate if there were any key decisions that were relevant for the ACT and then there would be a SEMC meeting, which has all the ministers and directors-general at it, where that would be formalised.

THE CHAIR: But you are sending all those emails out, rather than the Chief Minister’s office or the Chief Minister’s directorate or the cabinet office?

Ms Cross: Cabinet office would communicate the decisions of cabinet and of the SEMC of cabinet. The rest of it I will follow up with emails where necessary, but a lot of it is verbal communication.

MS LE COUTEUR: This is a supplementary on my previous question. I was looking at the coronavirus live reports and it seems that in New South Wales there have been legislation changes so that nurses, paramedics and teachers do not have to prove they are infected by COVID-19 at work to make a workers compo claim. That was a better example of my question, “Do we have to do something legislatively, as far as coronavirus is concerned, for liabilities?”

Ms Cross: Thank you. I will follow that up for you.

THE CHAIR: What are some of the key learnings of the last five or six weeks? What could be done better, in the event that there is either a second wave or another similar event in the future, that could result in a more coordinated or a more efficient response?

Ms Cross: I do not think I would identify any deficiencies. I think what we are doing mirrors the arrangements which are set out under the Emergencies Act. We are not using the act—we have just done this through a cabinet decision—but we have pretty much followed the arrangements set out in the ACT emergency plan. I am the coordinator-general. Under the act, I would be the emergency controller. It is a different mechanism, but I think, by using the health emergency plan, what we have set up is very robust and we would repeat it.

I think we were fortunate that we had been using these sorts of arrangements during the bushfires. Most of what we are doing has been tested, albeit in different circumstances. Looking back, we have responded well.

The only thing I would say is that I hope I do not have to do this again, where the speed of change through a mechanism like national cabinet is quite as fast, because I think everybody felt that things were moving very, very quickly. It would be nice, in future, if you could have a more measured pace. But if you cannot, then I think that

the arrangements we put in place have actually worked very well.

THE CHAIR: Just going back to something that I asked about earlier with regard to hospitality venues, you mentioned that you are not engaged in that process in particular. Is that correct?

Ms Cross: As I understand it, there is a reference group that has been set up, a hospitality reference group. The normal part of government that deals with business has set that up and it is working directly with the industry. And then there is an internal working group as well that is looking at the approach to opening up cafes and restaurants, what guidance we can provide them, what sort of compliance arrangements we will put in place, and what sort of messaging we will put out. That is all being led by the part of CMTEDD that normally deals with business.

THE CHAIR: That, to me, seems like an obvious one where some coordination across the agencies would be beneficial. You have got health inspectors, you have got the pandemic response, you have got liquor licensing and gaming, you have got the planning and then you have got economic development as well.

Ms Cross: Yes, and they are represented on the working group. That is what the working group is bringing together. If an issue comes up, they can raise it with me if they need support, but otherwise that is the mechanism that we have been putting in place. It is led by one of the members of the deputies group. There is a direct line through, but it is at a working group level.

THE CHAIR: I guess it goes to a lingering question I have got: is that not exactly what your role is, to actually coordinate that sort of working group?

Ms Cross: Yes, it is, but I would not want to be on all of them. That one where there is an obvious lead and it is someone on our deputies group—they are reporting to the deputies group daily or as needed—is a working group that sits under the coordinator-general's group. Given the complexity and the number of things which are happening, I could not physically be on all of them. And because that one is a well-established mechanism, working smoothly, they are reporting on progress but I am not actively attending.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. There are no further questions from my colleagues. I thank you once again for attending today and for the work that you are doing on behalf of the territory. A copy of the transcript will be supplied to you in the coming weeks. Please review that. Again, thanks for attending today's hearing.

Ms Cross: Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 11.53 am.