



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 2021
PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

(Reference: [Inquiry into the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response](#))

Members:

**MS E LEE (Chair)
MS S ORR (Deputy Chair)
MS J CLAY**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 11 OCTOBER 2021

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr D Monk (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.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 4.30 pm.

BARR, MR ANDREW, Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism

LEIGH, MS KATHY, Head of Service and Director-General, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

CROKE, MS LEESA, Coordinator-General, Whole of Government COVID-19 (Non-Health) Response and Deputy Director-General, Policy and Cabinet, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

ARTHY, MS KAREENA, Deputy Director-General, Economic Development, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

MINERS, MR STEPHEN, Acting Under Treasurer, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to the second public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response. The committee acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people, and acknowledges and respects their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of the city and this region. We also acknowledge and welcome any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that may be attending today's event. Today we will hear evidence from the Chief Minister, Andrew Barr, and his directorate officials.

The main housekeeping matter that I raise is that, because we are conducting this public hearing via a video link, technical issues may arise. If this occurs, please be patient and our technical officers will attend to these matters as soon as possible.

Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded and will be transcribed and published by Hansard. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

When taking a question on notice—I am sure you are used to this—it would be helpful if you could please state very clearly, “I will be taking that question on notice.” This will help the committee and the witnesses to confirm from the transcript questions taken on notice.

Today we have the Chief Minister, Andrew Barr, and his directorate officials: Kathy Leigh, Head of Service; Leesa Croke, Coordinator-General, Whole of Government COVID-19 (Non-Health) Response; Kareena Arthy, Deputy Director-General, Economic Development; and Stephen Miners, Acting Under Treasurer. Chief Minister, can we start with you.

Mr Barr: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Leigh: I also acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Croke: I also acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Arthy: I also acknowledge the privilege statement.

Mr Miners: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Today's proceedings are covered by parliamentary privilege, which provides protection to witnesses but also, of course, obliges them to tell the truth. The provision of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter, and all participants today are reminded of this. Thank you for confirming. Chief Minister, would you like to start with an opening statement?

Mr Barr: No. I am happy to go to questions. I think the practice these days is that you do not let ministers make opening statements anymore, so I will adhere to that.

THE CHAIR: I thought I would be generous. If I could just go to the first question, your pathway that was announced a few weeks ago now talks about lockdown being lifted on Friday, 15 October, but for many businesses there are of course still some ongoing restrictions that will apply. What ACT government business support will be available for businesses that will continue to be hampered by restrictions beyond 15 October?

Mr Barr: There will be a number of programs that will still be in place: the commercial tenancy assistance; the Small Business Hardship Scheme; and the tourism accommodation provider, hospitality, sport and fitness industry support fund. There will be rent relief for those businesses that operate within ACT government properties and commercial tenancy assistance for those who have private rental arrangements. There are payroll tax or deferral opportunities available. Then there is the turnover-based larger business funding as well. That is part of the negotiated package with the commonwealth. That provides additional funding for businesses who would not be eligible for the Small Business Hardship Scheme and who have turnover between \$2 million and \$5 million, \$5 million and \$10 million, and above \$10 million. And there are increasingly tiered payments for the larger businesses, based on their relative turnover.

THE CHAIR: I know that you touched on it this morning at the press conference, but can you just explain, in terms of beyond 15 October—or, more likely, beyond the 80 per cent vaccination rate—how the business support will change?

Mr Barr: The commonwealth will stop paying once a jurisdiction goes over 80 per cent fully vaccinated, with the exception of their partnership with us on the tourism accommodation provider, hospitality, sport and fitness program, where we negotiated with them a longer tail, a continued supply of financial support, because those industries would be impacted by ongoing restrictions beyond the 80 per cent mark.

THE CHAIR: What does that longer tail look like? Does that have an end date in terms of a certain vaccination point or an end date per se?

Mr Barr: No, it does not have a vaccination point end date. It has a fiscal component. The estimated cost for that is around another \$23 million.

THE CHAIR: Is that federal or is that ACT?

Mr Barr: It is a total program cost that would be shared fifty-fifty between the two jurisdictions.

THE CHAIR: Did the ACT government consider what New South Wales has done, which is to go alone on their—I think they call it—JobSaver program?

Mr Barr: We have the Small Business Hardship Scheme and we have the commercial tenancy assistance arrangements. Because we did not stand up a JobKeeper-type arrangement, we stood up the business grants arrangement.

THE CHAIR: Was there any modelling done to compare how much a similar program like the one in New South Wales would be, compared to what we have in the ACT?

Mr Barr: It would depend on the business size and the duration of their support. The initial negotiations with the commonwealth were modelled on what was done in South Australia, where there was a one-week initial lockdown. We then transitioned from that to a model not dissimilar to the Victorian one. Then it progressed further to a discussion not dissimilar to the New South Wales level of support. We then put to the commonwealth a range of different proposals around ongoing assistance beyond certain dates, tapered for particular industry sectors, noting that some had restrictions eased five weeks ago and others will still be subject to restrictions in five weeks time. So it has varied and would depend on the particular circumstances.

Obviously, New South Wales were more than 100 days—four months—in lockdown. We will not be four months in lockdown. So there is no comparison between the two jurisdictions in terms of the economic impact.

THE CHAIR: In terms of the total cost of the small business scheme, are you able to take on notice what that is, if you do not have that now?

Mr Barr: The Small Business Hardship Scheme?

THE CHAIR: The hardship scheme, yes.

Mr Barr: That will be approximately \$46½ million.

THE CHAIR: Is that 100 per cent ACT government funds?

Mr Barr: Yes, that is correct.

MS ORR: I have a supplementary. Just for clarity, because you did touch on it, what role has the federal government played in preparing for the economic recovery in the package that we have seen?

Mr Barr: The commonwealth support is to jointly fund the businesses support grants and extension payments. That is anticipated to be around \$291 million. That is split fifty-fifty between the ACT government and the commonwealth. They are also jointly funding the tourism accommodation provider, hospitality, events, fitness and sport industry package, which is just a little shy of \$23 million, funded fifty-fifty. They

have also provided around \$290 million of COVID disaster payments. If you just bear with me, I can tell you exactly what that is. Of course, it is the one screen I do not have open. Bear with me. It is about \$290 million, but I will come back to it. I will just load up the right screen to tell you that.

I have got the page. The commonwealth have paid out, as of 10 October, \$297.4 million in COVID disaster payments, and 64,000 people have received at least one payment. They are talking about that being about \$36 million paid in initial and recurring payments in the week ending 10 October. So it has peaked in terms of the number of people who are being supported. Obviously, as industries have returned to work, people have gone off those disaster payments and it is now running at a lower level than it was before in terms of the number of people receiving payments because more are back at work.

MS ORR: Do you think that, with the federal government supports being extended, that would have improved the individual experiences of Canberrans?

Mr Barr: I think they made a decision to taper the disaster payments down at a 70 per cent threshold, which we have now crossed, which will require people who are currently on the payments to reapply for the further, presumably, two weeks before we hit 80 per cent fully vaccinated, at which point it then begins to taper down from the \$750 to \$450, I understand. That will continue for another couple of weeks and then it phases out completely. It will be, I guess, a question for them operationally, given that it is in a weekly cycle, whether they—which I think they will do—wait until the end of that week that we pass 70 and then 80 per cent before beginning the taper down.

At this point I would anticipate that those payments will still be available in a diminishing form through until at least mid-November unless they make a decision to cut them earlier. But I think that that is where it is going to land. That will see us well into the transition phase in terms of the public health social measures. We will be at the point that retail will have fully reopened at one per four square metres, and hospitality will have moved to much higher capacity limits by that point, at which point we would anticipate that demand for staff will start to return.

Bear in mind that when this started there was a severe shortage of staff in retail and hospitality—not a start-off base of effectively full employment. So it will not take long for that to rebound back to there not being available staff, noting that the pool of people they normally draw a lot of their casual staff from are absent from the territory at the moment because they are students, either international or domestic. We are seeing that in the vaccination data for 20 to 24-year-olds in particular, which is demonstrating that there are clearly thousands of people in that age group who are not in Canberra at the moment because they are studying remotely.

MS CLAY: Chief Minister, the arts community really appreciated some of the targeted grants that came out and were put upfront, but it has been noted to me a lot that most of the COVID business support was tied to GST registration, which is not really how the arts sector works. I think we have put up a lot of information on that. I am just wondering why those COVID-19 business support grants were tied to GST and why we did not get the same sort of ATO carve-up as we had for the arts in other

areas.

Mr Barr: Because the commonwealth required \$75,000 in GST registration as their minimum threshold. That was non-negotiable on their part. Their answer, though, was that people would be eligible for the disaster payment, which at \$750 tax free is around \$1,000 a week pre-tax. It would equate to an annual salary of around \$50,000. That was their rationale. They would be providing, effectively, the equivalent of \$50,000 per annum in income support through the disaster payment mechanism. To the extent that that was paid weekly and was able to be done without having to go through a turnover assessment process arguably would leave people with turnovers of less than \$75,000 probably in a better position.

Of course, if you were sitting between \$52,000 and \$75,000 maybe you might not have done as well out of that arrangement. But it obviously was not designed to be a full income replacement scheme. Neither have the business grants been designed to be a full income replacement scheme for business. Neither government is in a position to fully replace all income lost due to the pandemic. That is not possible.

MS CLAY: Did you get feedback that arts practitioners found that they were eligible for one or the other of those grants, that everybody was eligible for one of those?

Mr Barr: We did not get direct feedback in relation to the Services Australia eligibility because that is a commonwealth program, but I suspect that, had there been a major problem of people not being able to access one payment or the other, we definitely would have heard about that. And we have not. The officials are not reporting any significant feedback on that question.

THE CHAIR: Chief Minister, just a supplementary: going back to when I was talking about the Small Business Hardship Scheme, you mentioned that \$46½ million had been set aside. Can you tell me the status of that scheme and when it will open? My understanding is that the official advice says it will open in October 2021.

Mr Barr: Yes. That is correct. I might get Ms Arthy to talk about that scheme.

Ms Arthy: We are just going through the final stages of the design of that scheme, as well as the implementation side of it, because we have had to stand up the business support grants, which is, as I am sure the Chief Minister has said many times, the largest grant program we have ever done in the territory. We are trying to design the implementation of the hardship scheme to make it as easy for business to access as possible, because the hardship scheme was actually designed, originally, before the business support grants. At this stage we are looking to complete that design in the next couple of weeks. We still have not settled on when it is going to be open for businesses to apply, but we are trying to get there as quickly as we can.

THE CHAIR: How was the figure of \$46½ million to set aside for this scheme determined?

Ms Arthy: I may have to defer to my Treasury colleagues on that one.

Mr Miners: The calculation was literally a matter of the number of applicants

expected to receive by the average amounts that would be expected to be paid for them, a straight price times quantity.

THE CHAIR: Can you provide those figures or, if you do not have them on you, on notice?

Mr Miners: Yes, I can take them on notice.

MS CASTLEY: My understanding is that the ATO, through the federal government, offered to partner with the states and territories in order to assist with the support—the grants scheme. Did that offer come through to the ACT government? If so, did you take it up? Why did you not take it up?

Mr Barr: No, we do not believe so.

MS CASTLEY: The ATO, through the federal government, did not offer at all to work with the territory to help with this scheme so that it was not such a burden?

Mr Barr: No, I am not aware of any suggestion that the commonwealth payment mechanisms would be utilised. It was very clear that states and territories were to administer the schemes.

MRS JONES: Just very briefly, as of yesterday, Chief Minister, vaccination rate percentages for people 16 and over—and I know we have been using various figures throughout the pandemic but this is for 16 and over—of two doses yesterday in New South Wales were 73.53 of the population, and 72.83 of the population in the ACT. Given that we are so close to New South Wales on vaccination rates, can you understand the frustrations of some, for example parents who have not been able to buy shoes for their kids for some time, that our shops are not opening and that we are maintaining for additional days the restrictions that we have? Are you able to give some explanation why?

Mr Barr: Yes. Our vaccination rates are not as high as New South Wales, although we are rapidly catching them. But it is a matter of 96 hours difference.

MRS JONES: Just above half a per cent below New South Wales?

Mr Barr: Yes. At the time that decisions were made, the vaccination gap was somewhat different. Our program has been exceptional. It is nation-leading. But at the time that decisions were made in relation to the lockdown period, the expectation was and remains that we would get beyond 70 per cent this week. New South Wales made the decision that the Monday following them passing a particular threshold they would open. Our opening is this Friday.

MRS JONES: But given that we have achieved such a great rate, why can't the opening be brought forward for those who are desperate to get things at the shops?

Mr Barr: Friday. It is not negotiable.

MS ORR: As a supplementary, are you happy with the rate of vaccinations in the

ACT?

Mr Barr: It is amongst the highest in the world on first doses. We obviously have a very significant next three weeks to get the second doses in the arms of, principally, people under the age of 40. If you look at the vaccination rates for those cohorts, they are still sitting well below 70 per cent. For people under 25 it is sitting at around 40 per cent. For the 12 to 15-year-olds it is only about 10 or 11 per cent, obviously because they were the last group to have access. So it is important that we get all of those rates up above 70 and 80 per cent, which we intend to do. And, based on first doses, we will.

The only cohort that I have some concerns about is 20 to 24-year-olds, whose first dose rate is sitting at the moment at about 77½ per cent. As I have indicated publicly, we do believe that there are several thousand people in that age cohort who are university students who are studying remotely and are not in the ACT at the moment. And it is our view that they have not changed their Medicare address to the ACT. Whilst they may be getting vaccinated either overseas or interstate, it will be recorded against the vaccination tallies of those other jurisdictions.

Beyond that, we have nation-leading vaccination. And the expectation is, based on the bookings we have in our system, that we will cross 98 per cent first dose for 12-plus—the actual eligible population, not the fantasy number that is the 16-plus that is being used, which does not account for people who are actually eligible. I think it is important to focus on 12-plus. I have said that from the start—many, many, months ago. As soon as they are eligible we should be counting them in our official statistics.

I believe we are the only jurisdiction that is still formally doing that. But I see that the commonwealth reporting does now at least provide some data on 12 to 15-year-olds. I am pleased to report that they are the fastest vaccinating cohort in Australia, the 12 to 15-year-old ACT residents. That tells you a lot about this community and the concern that parents have for their teenage kids to get vaccinated, and to do so ahead of going back to school, which is a fantastic testimony, really, as to how seriously this community takes public health.

DR PATERSON: Chief Minister, given that so much of the weighting is on the 70 per cent to 80 per cent vaccination rates, can you outline the issues of supply of the vaccine over the course of the last few months and how that changed to get us to this point today?

Mr Barr: Yes. If we had had a proper supply of vaccines from the start, if the federal government had ordered enough vaccines and had got deals done earlier then we would have been where we are now three months earlier. We may not have even had to go into this lockdown because we would have been 99 per cent vaccinated. The reason we are where we are now is that there were not sufficient vaccines to vaccinate not just this community but New South Wales and Victoria and everywhere else around the country.

I am delighted that, since supply stopped being an issue, we have now roared to 98 per cent first dose. There was a lack of ambition in the national vaccination program. I have sat in on a lot of meetings at National Cabinet and other bodies where

no-one thought that any jurisdiction was going to get above 90 per cent. Even as recently as a few weeks ago, we were arguing about the increased supply that would help us to get to 99 per cent now. We were successful in winning those extra doses because we fought for them and because we knew we had the most efficient vaccination program in the nation.

I take the opportunity to again highlight and congratulate the amazing effort of not only Canberra Health Services and ACT Health but our primary healthcare network, our GPs and our pharmacists. What we do have data on is 33 weeks of administration and utilisation of the vaccination program. Our nurses at Canberra Health Services had 370,946 doses available to them of the Pfizer phials. They have been able to administer 374,410 because of their best practice approach to being able to extract a seventh dose from those Pfizer batches. In each little bottle the expectation was that you could get six. But with the needles that they are using, and the best practice work approach that they have, we have been able to administer more than the commonwealth deem to have been allocated to us. We are the only state or territory that has zero available minus administered in terms of the efficiency of the scheme—better than New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, WA, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory.

The only thing that has held this community back from getting to where we are now has been the slowness of the vaccine supply. But now that we have got the vaccines we are going to cross over 98 per cent. And we are on track to reach 99. That tells you something about the efficiency of Canberra Health Services and about the willingness of the Canberra community to come forward and get vaccinated to protect each other, to protect family and friends and to support a strong economic recovery.

As Deloitte Access Economics were very clear about in their report—it received a lot of publicity this morning—our economic recovery will be stronger through November and December as a result of being a fully vaccinated community. And it is a great testimony to Canberrans putting public health first that we are where we are today.

THE CHAIR: Chief Minister, as a supplementary, I think that we are all very thankful for the high vaccination rates in the ACT, and we echo our thanks to the frontline health staff. But there is an area of Canberra where, according to the figures from as late as last week, east Canberra—and that is in our common electorate of Kurrajong—Pialligo, Symonston, Oaks Estate and Majura are at first dose 52 per cent and second dose at 36.3 per cent. That is significantly lower than the territory average and, indeed, even the national average. What do you have to say about those rates, and how much of that is a concern to you?

Mr Barr: I imagine the actual number of people there, given the postcodes we are talking about, is likely to be in the hundreds, not the thousands. I will seek some further advice from the vaccination team as to what appears to be a statistical anomaly. I would be interested to know the actual number of people that are residents in that area that you have talked about. It is certainly not known to be a large population area, but there may well be dozens or hundreds of people. We will have a look at whether that is, in fact, a statistical anomaly around Medicare addresses. Obviously the data is—

THE CHAIR: It is about 1,600 people.

Mr Barr: There would be several hundred people there, then, who we would need to get first doses to, and that would be a priority over the coming days.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for that commitment.

MS ORR: Can you outline the pathway out of lockdown put forward by the Doherty modelling for the ACT?

Mr Barr: Yes, after much discussion by National Cabinet and the requirement by National Cabinet members, or at least a majority of them, that the Doherty Institute undertake further modelling to provide us with some more accurate scenarios around how many cases would be the starting point for reopening. Their initial modelling was based on a 30-case seated event—and that was nationwide—when the reality, of course, was that there are thousands of cases. Even in the ACT at the moment we have 450-odd active cases. So we required some further work to be done.

That work came back with a very clear recommendation that opening at 70 per cent with that number of cases was not prudent. So an 80 per cent mark was the more prudent approach, which is the policy that the ACT has obviously adopted. Doherty were not asked—and I perhaps regret this—to model 90 per cent, 95 per cent and 99 per cent vaccination coverage, but what we can extrapolate from their work, together with really a point of common sense and lived experience, is that the more vaccinated a community is, the safer any reopening and the more protected that community will be from severe disease, hospitalisation and the need for either acute or intensive care.

All the evidence around Australia, and very much globally, is that there are very few fully vaccinated people who, when they contract COVID, find themselves in intensive care. There are some that require hospitalisation and there are the occasional breakthrough infections that do lead people to be quite severely ill. But the evidence shows that the vaccines are proving to be very effective in preventing severe disease and in reducing but not eliminating, just reducing, transmission of the virus.

It is still possible for fully vaccinated people to get quite sick. It is certainly possible for fully vaccinated people to carry the virus and to transmit it to others, including other vaccinated people, and there is quite a lot of evidence emerging around fully vaccinated people who transmit the virus but are asymptomatic. They do not even know that they have got the virus.

Part of the work and assumptions associated with Doherty Institute modelling has been to look at the effectiveness of test, trace, isolate and quarantine arrangements and how they will necessarily need to be adapted in the vaccination transition phases that the ACT, New South Wales and Victoria are going through at the moment. Doherty have presented their first pass of that modelling to National Cabinet. It will inform some future decisions that will be made locally and, indeed, nationally. I think the greatest interest to the community will be what the isolation and quarantine arrangements are going to be related to both travel and if and when you test positive or you are a close contact of someone who tests positive.

We will make some further announcements on the next stage of TTIQ this week. I foreshadowed that at the press conference today. But it is certainly, as the Chief Health Officer has observed, moving in a direction that will focus our test, trace, isolate and quarantine measures on positive cases and close contacts much more in the future, rather than casual or sites that have been listed as “monitor for symptoms”. That is the direction that that is heading.

Clearly, Doherty have, in their modelling, indicated a need for ongoing public health social measures, density restrictions, capacity limits and other measures still being in place through the vaccination transition phases 70 to 80 and even 80 and beyond. Where we might need to commission some further work from them is at what level of vaccination—for example, 99 per cent—can you move beyond public health social measures?

The other question that remains unresolved and is still the subject of further Doherty Institute modelling—and again a first pass has been presented to National Cabinet—is quarantine arrangements, particularly for those coming in from overseas, and whether home quarantine is preferred and what the duration of a home quarantine model would look like. This has very significant implications, for example, for the return of international students to the ACT and for future international tourism and, of course, family reunions and the like for either ACT residents who are overseas and who want to return or residents who are here now and who would have a reason to go overseas and then want to know what their quarantine arrangements would be on return.

We would hope to have clarity on those matters as they relate to international borders. It is principally a decision of the commonwealth government, but as they have abdicated their responsibility for quarantine, their constitutional responsibility for quarantine, it has been passed to the states and territories. We will have to actually do the legwork and make it all work.

That is coming back to National Cabinet for some further consideration. At the moment we would expect that to be a few weeks away before it is resolved. I hope that covers the overview of Doherty modelling.

MS ORR: It does. I have a supplementary and I will be quick because I know Ms Clay is probably quite keen to get to her question. How does this interact with the Treasury modelling?

Mr Barr: The commonwealth Treasury modelling?

MS ORR: Yes.

Mr Barr: Certainly the Treasury modelling is presuming more movement across borders and a return, for example, of international students at a reasonable number—not necessarily every single student back but not a pilot scheme of a couple of hundred—needing to have thousands of students back in time for the 2022 academic year. We acknowledge that this is very, very important.

The fundamental issue really now around international travel is new variants of the virus coming into the nation, because COVID will be endemic in Australia. There will

be tens of thousands of cases within Australia but we will be protected because we are vaccinated. The issue will be: what if a new variant comes in from overseas, from countries that are not well vaccinated, or continents that are not well vaccinated? This, I think, is straying somewhat out of our direct responsibility but the international COVAX efforts are significant and do have implications for the Australian states and territories because our next risk point is new variants being brought in from overseas.

Whilst it is great that we are as vaccinated as we are, we do also, as a nation, have responsibilities particularly to the Pacific and to our nearer neighbours to support their vaccination efforts as well. This is important because it will protect us from new variants that we may not have vaccination protection from. We just do not know yet how this virus might mutate in an international context.

MS CLAY: Chief Minister, I would love to have a chat about the return to school and particularly the return to primary school. I have heard a lot of concern from parents, and I think it is really pivoting on the fact that we have said this disease is so dangerous that they need to keep their kids at home for months. Now we are suddenly saying, “We know that your under-12s are not vaccinated, but now it is safe.” I think it is a sort of cognitive pivot. There is a list of questions specifically that have been put to me by a lot of people.

I would like to start with mask wearing. We have got mask wearing encouraged for grades 3 to 6 but actively discouraged under that because apparently it might be a choking hazard. I am hearing a lot of confusion from parents about whether masks are useful at preventing the spread of the disease amongst primary school kids or whether they are not useful.

Mr Barr: I suspect that these sorts of quite detailed questions might be best answered by public health professionals. I am not the Chief Health Officer. I think where you are going here really does need some more direct medical advice. I do not feel qualified to answer in medical terms those particular issues.

I can advise that, from a process perspective, the AHPPC, which is the peak body of all the CHOs, including the commonwealth and the state and territory chief health officers, has provided written statements and advice to National Cabinet on these matters. I think, to give you quite detailed medical advice, it would be best either that I take the questions on notice and we can provide written answers to the committee or that they are discussed with the Chief Health Officer. I am not qualified to give medical advice on mask wearing.

MS CLAY: I can take it to a high, top line. A lot of the confusion that is expressed to me is coming from the fact that the ACT has made difference choices from other jurisdictions like Victoria and the United States and that there does not seem to be a lot of information either on the COVID-19 website or on the Education website about the evidence base. The AHPPC is obviously the evidence base. Are we planning on linking in how we are making those decisions?

Mr Barr: Yes. There is obviously quite a lot of national discussion where the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Paul Kelly, has spoken at length about these matters, but if it would be helpful to provide some links to the medical advice from the ACT

Education website then I am happy to raise that with Minister Berry.

MS CLAY: I think it might be. A lot of the concerns came to me. I have a seven-year-old. I got the information from my school and I have had a look. We have got a bit of a disconnect. There is the COVID website that has excellent information and helplines for businesses and all the rest of it, and then there is nothing on that website about kids and nothing about the return to school. Then there is the directorate stuff and they do not link in. There is no helpline for people to call. I think what they are doing is calling MLAs and asking us these questions, which is probably not the best place. I might lodge some detailed questions, but it might be good if there could be some more top-line stuff.

I wonder if I can ask you about the vaccination rates for teachers. Do you have that information?

Mr Barr: Yes. We believe that, at the moment, it is at around 97.5 per cent first dose, which is largely where the territory position is. We are obviously engaging with the teaching profession through their union, through the Education Directorate and with Catholic and independent schools as well. I presume your question is not just about public education, as to the vaccination status there. We are not the employer of non-government school teachers but we will obviously consider, based on the vaccination uptake, the vaccination requirements for teachers in this next phase.

MS CLAY: The 97.5 per cent actually sounds quite good to me. Is that information publicly listed on the Education Directorate website or on the COVID-19 website to reassure parents?

Mr Barr: I do not believe we have been breaking it down by occupational category. There is some information available, I guess, collectively around age groups but not necessarily by occupational status. Where there is some further information is contained within the commonwealth's data reports on particular occupations and then you can see the by-age category.

But we are now at the point where, effectively, unless the assumption is made that the remaining several thousand people—potentially, say, 4,000 who have not yet had a first dose—are all teachers, and teachers are not following the same vaccination trends as the rest of the community then it is reasonable to assume that the vaccination rates are well above 90 per cent.

Then the only cohorts, as I mentioned earlier, that are not above 90 per cent now are 16 to 19-year-old. I am presuming none of them are teachers because you would not be qualified, you would not have gone through uni. The 12 to 15-year-olds are definitely not teachers. The only other age cohort that is not at 90 or above on first dose is 20 to 24-year-olds, and there could be some teachers in that age group. That would be, I think, the only one that we would be somewhat concerned about, but they would be first and second-year teachers, I presume, because by the time you have done your three-year degree, plus your Dip Ed, you are probably going to be at least 22, I suspect.

MS CLAY: Looking ahead, do you think we are expecting a vaccine for under-12s at

some stage?

Mr Barr: I am aware that Pfizer are undertaking clinical trials in the United States for their vaccine, at a reduced dosage, I understand, for five to 11-year-olds. They have been encouraged to share their results and apply through the TGA process in Australia but it is still, it would seem, months away.

MS CLAY: Maybe early next year, is that—

Mr Barr: That would appear to be probably the earliest, but it would require TGA assessment and approval. That is a commonwealth matter, not something that is within our control.

DR PATERSON: Chief Minister, I was just wondering: given that some of the first points of this outbreak were schools, are there lessons that we have learnt from those outbreaks, going forward?

Mr Barr: Yes. We have certainly seen the ability for household transmission. One of the very clear recommendations, even from Professor Peter Doherty himself, was that it would be very important to vaccinate all the adults who are around and are household contacts of the unvaccinated children and that that would be a very important part of the decision-making around being able to return to school in a safer way. That process obviously is taking place now and we have very high vaccination rates. But it would be worth noting that—and I do not want to make too many assumptions here around the age of parents who have primary school-aged kids but on the basis that a number of them would be in their 30s and 40s, particularly parents aged between 30 and 39—they are not yet at 70 per cent full vaccination.

To go to the broader thinking about when is schooling safe to return, vaccinating the parents is a very critical part of that and we are well on our way, but we are not there yet, particularly for parents aged 25 to 39.

DR PATERSON: What is the outlook on consumer confidence as we come out of the hard lockdown next week?

Mr Barr: We are getting some data out of research institutes like Roy Morgan and others and some data from the banks around consumer patterns. We have also obviously got a lived experience from 2020 when we came out of lockdown then. Really it is both a combination of supply and demand-side constraints because of restrictions on trade, the public health measures or the demand-side impact in tourism and accommodation and all the rest, and Sydney and Melbourne in lockdown. In that period that we experienced in July and August, for example, a lot of businesses lost their major markets because of lockdowns elsewhere.

The same thing happened last year. It was a very strong recovery. A good example is hospitality: cafes, restaurants, takeaways. In last year's lockdown their turnover fell to between \$40 million and \$50 million a month. That is where it is at the moment. It very quickly rebounded to \$80 million a month within a few months of things opening up again. Those months that were \$80 million a month being spent in restaurants, cafes and takeaways in the ACT are the highest months ever recorded. The first six

months of calendar year 2021 were the highest turnover ever for restaurants, cafes and takeaways.

It will not be the highest year ever now because we have had six months of high \$70 million or \$80 million. Now we have had a few months of \$45 million or \$50 million. So it is not going to be the strongest year ever. But I think we can expect \$30 million a month, or \$1 million a day, to be spent in restaurants, cafes and takeaways as that returns to full trade. By November-December you will start to see it climb back into the \$60 million to \$70 million a month. By February next year it will be back to \$80 a month. It becomes, over 12 months, nearly a billion-dollar industry in the ACT.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, I would like to ask about restrictions. We know that in hospitality, as you have just mentioned, we have got this one person per four square metre rule—or 10 people, around about that. This morning a new task force was announced to help the hospitality industry. On the website it says that they are looking for innovative ways to open up outdoor public space for venues. Given that we are only four nights away from that opening up occurring, would you not say that that is too little too late? What is that that you are hoping your task force is going to achieve?

Mr Barr: They will be able to provide some bespoke solutions for individual businesses around, for example, transforming some places that are reserved for car parking into additional outdoor space for certain businesses. We are looking at particularly precincts and streets that we may be able to in fact close off to through traffic—not main streets but side streets—to enable some additional outdoor space. Given that the outdoor dining capacity limit will be 50, at one per four square metres we will be looking for 200 square metre spaces. There are many businesses that already have 200 square metre spaces outdoors but there are others that might only have 100 metres where we might be able to expand their footprint as a temporary arrangement.

The team obviously have been working in advance of today's announcement to map out particular areas and priorities, including some of the well-established dining precincts that we are all familiar with, and they have done preliminary work on where additional space can be created in order to enable those businesses to have access to more free public space during this transition period.

Beyond the next two weeks, we then take a step where the capacity limits increase further. That would enable outdoor at one per two square metres and up to a maximum of 150. You would be then looking at 300 square metre locations. They are going to be a little more difficult to conjure up. But we are very open, for example, to closing certain streets to through traffic to enable outdoor dining to set up increased volume. It is not going to work in every single street, but we think there might be some innovative trials that might lead to longer term outdoor dining precincts and change the nature of the way that we do alfresco in Canberra.

MS CASTLEY: How is this different to the Better Regulation Taskforce and the limited amount that they got in the budget? Are they talking to the businesses that are not in these well-established areas—for instance, Kingston? What about the quiet places that are thinking they probably cannot come back with the one person per four

square metre rule? As I say, four days out from opening up, how do they get hold of help from your task force?

Mr Barr: They make a phone call. We do have detailed mapping of all the public spaces in every government owned area.

MS CASTLEY: What is the phone number?

Mr Barr: We obviously do not control private open space, but we do have an established process with thousands of existing permits and arrangements for businesses to trade outdoors. You are making this sound like it is incredibly difficult and you are trying to find ways for it not to happen. We are very keen for it to happen and we are going to support it happening.

MS CASTLEY: Why was it not announced earlier, Chief Minister? We have got people who have got four days notice. Earlier I heard you say that it is difficult to get staff. This might mean there is a possibility that some businesses who were not considering opening possibly now can. We have heard that so many cannot conceive of opening with these restrictions. But it might be a possibility now. It is a late announcement. Why was this not thought up earlier and announced to the ACT, to allow people to get prepared?

Mr Barr: It has been. I announced the extra 50—being 50 outdoor, if you choose outdoor—three weeks ago.

THE CHAIR: What is the membership of that task force and do they have terms of reference?

Mr Barr: It is Access Canberra staff who are available to provide assistance to individual businesses. This is the team that does the outdoor dining permits. I think you are all confusing it with an industry association task force. No; this is people who go out and say, “Yes, you can have this space. We will approve the permit for you to expand to this space.” It is Access Canberra.

THE CHAIR: So it is all public servants. What is the size of the team?

Mr Barr: I do not know the exact number of staff. I will take that on notice.

MS CASTLEY: For people who have organised events, we know that in November we are looking at things getting better. If there is an event with a couple of hundred people outside and New South Wales or Victorian artists wanted to travel to the ACT to perform somewhere, are they going to be required to apply for exemptions or can they just come and go? Will the borders be open from an ACT perspective?

Mr Barr: That will depend on what New South Wales and Victoria do in relation to movement. I understand that Premier Perrottet and Premier Andrews have begun some discussions about the New South Wales-Victorian border. It would depend also, based on my understanding of New South Wales internal travel requirements at least until 1 December, on the vaccination status of the individual performer. It would also depend on where they had come from. So it is possible, even within New South Wales,

that they will still have targeted lockdowns in particular regions or postcodes or local government areas, based on COVID numbers in particular towns or cities.

I expect travel to be a lot freer, but there may still be some localised restrictions in relation to movement within New South Wales, let alone movement across the border from Victoria into New South Wales and then into the ACT. But we would hope to have more clarity on that over the coming weeks.

To be clear, nothing is changing between now and Friday. From the 15th to the 29th the expectation is only of an expanded regional travel arrangement around the Canberra region. From 29 October until 1 December, based on New South Wales's current position, you would need to be vaccinated and they would need to have crossed a certain vaccination threshold before, for example, they are allowing travel from Greater Sydney into regional New South Wales. They have also been clear that they still reserve the right to have targeted lockdowns in particular towns if there is a problem.

Just looking at the New South Wales cases now, they are trending down in Sydney but they are trending up in the Hunter and they are trending up in the Illawarra and the Shoalhaven. So there are still problems and pockets of much lower levels of vaccination in New South Wales. Victoria is still having cases in the thousands and it has seeded out of Melbourne into regional Victoria. At this point it is very difficult to be definitive, but things will look a lot better in a month or two when vaccination levels are even higher.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Chief Minister and your directorate officials. I think you did take a couple of questions on notice, as did the Acting Under Treasurer. The committee secretary will be in touch with you about that. The committee secretary will also provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing, when it is available, to check for accuracy. Thank you for attending today to assist the committee. I now call the hearing to a close.

The committee adjourned at 5.32 pm.