



**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, 22 NOVEMBER 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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Witnesses must tell the truth: giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter, and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 4.03 pm.

GENTLEMAN, MR MICK, Manager of Government Business, Minister for Corrections, Minister for Industrial Relations and Workplace Safety, Minister for Planning and Land Management and Minister for Police and Emergency Services
GAUGHAN, MR NEIL, Chief Police Officer, ACT Policing

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon and welcome to the final public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 2021 pandemic response. The committee acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people, and acknowledges and respects the continuing contribution and culture that they bring to the life of this city and region. We also acknowledge and welcome any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that may be joining us at today's event.

Today we will hear evidence from the Minister for Police and Emergency Services and ACT Policing representatives, and the Minister for Business and Better Regulation and CMTEED officials. Before we start, there are a few housekeeping matters that I draw to your attention. We are, of course, conducting this public hearing on a video conference platform. Technical issues may arise during the hearing. Please be patient and our technical officers will attend to these issues as quickly 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 it would be useful if you could please state very clearly, "I will take that as a question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

Welcome to Minister Gentleman and his officials. Please be aware that 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 and misleading evidence is a serious matter and all participants today are reminded of this.

Without further ado, I call Mr Gentleman. Do you have an opening statement minister?

Mr Gentleman: I do.

THE CHAIR: Can you, just before you start, please confirm that you have read and understood the privilege statement?

Mr Gentleman: Yes, I have read and understand the privilege statement. Thank you for the opportunity to give a short opening statement to you and the committee.

I would like to begin by acknowledging all our ACT Policing officers and staff for their tireless work to keep our community safe. I do commend ACT Policing for their outstanding response through the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent lockdown. Our officers have gone above and beyond to support the community, often in quite difficult circumstances. During the lockdown ACT Policing put in place a range of compliance activities when undertaking their support of the health directions that reflected community expectations.

As outlined in the estimates hearings by Deputy Chief Police Officer, Assistant Commissioner Peter Crosier, ACT Policing strategy was to engage, educate and enforce—engaging and educating in the first instance, shifting to strong enforcement action when it was warranted. The effectiveness of this approach was recognised during a Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement inquiry into the COVID-19 criminal activity and law recently up on the hill.

During the inquiry Mr Richard Wilson SC, as the co-director of the National Criminal Law Committee within the Law Council of Australia, advised that the ACT has a soft approach that was successful in the circumstances, stating that having hard enforcement options does not always mean that police have to behave in a hard, confrontational way. He said, as I understand it, that the police in the Australian Capital Territory have been taking a softer and more educational approach, with warnings and cautions and explaining things to people, rather than chasing them down, arresting them or giving them fines and so on. There can be a proportionate response.

ACT Policing's proportionate response is in line, of course, with the joint committee's recommendation that governments ensure that enforcing COVID-19 rules over the long term does not negatively impact on law enforcement's reputation and social licence.

While I am pleased with the effectiveness of ACT Policing's approach, which has been recognised by experts at the national level, I was disappointed by recent comments in the Assembly and in estimates criticising ACT Policing's COVID-19 response. It is disappointing that other members have chosen to criticise the hard work of our police officers who sacrifice so much to keep us safe and have demonstrated high levels of commitment and dedication in response to COVID-19.

Throughout the pandemic our police officers have proven themselves to be incredibly capable, resilient and reflective of the expectations of the community in which they live and work. ACT Policing has always remained in a strong position to provide community policing to the ACT and I remain proud of their conduct throughout this challenging time. The community can be assured that police resources have been available to support and protect our community and always will be. Again, our restrictions have eased and the need for compliance activities is less. Our officers now are resuming a broader in-person community engagement again.

I look forward to continuing to support them as they undertake this transition over the coming months.

MS CLAY: Thank you for that opening statement, minister, and we certainly do appreciate the work of ACT Policing during the lockdown; it has been refreshing, particularly when we see the approaches in the states. I just want to tease out some of the data. I am not sure if we got that data public, and I apologise if I am asking things that are already on record. I want to know, during the latest lockdown period and during the latest outbreak, the last few months, how many arrests have been made that also involved a breach of a public health direction. Have we got figures on that?

Mr Gentleman: Yes, we should have those exact figures. I will go to our CPO and he

should be able to provide those for you.

Mr Gaughan: I have read and understand the privilege statement as well. In total, 49 persons were arrested for offences in relation to the public health direction. However, the vast majority of those were actually for other offences as well as the public health direction. There were only seven persons that were arrested solely on the health directions with no other offences. So 76 infringements were issued in relation to breaches of the health direction, 121 cautions were issued and we asked 828 persons to move on, which were primarily around congregation groups, people not wearing face masks and then they complied. Again, we were sticking to that “engage, educate and then enforce” methodology.

MS CLAY: How many of the arrests that included breach of a public health direction ended up being an arrest of somebody who was COVID positive?

Mr Gaughan: I would have to take that on notice. There were a number who actually were COVID positive, and we obviously had to manage them. However, no-one who was arrested solely for a breach of the health direction ended up in the AMC. Everyone that was arrested just for a fail to comply was bailed from the City Police Watch-house.

MS CLAY: Just so that I can understand the decision-making and how we ran through these processes, when somebody was arrested for a non-PHD offence—a non-COVID-related offence—what was the thinking in making sure to add on the breach of the public health direction offence? Was that seen to be very important?

Mr Gaughan: I can give you some examples of why it occurred, I suppose, is the best analogy we can use. This was when we were in the height of the lockdown when people were supposed to stay at home unless there was an essential reason to do so. In many instances we actually found those people exceeding the speed limit in Gungahlin when they should have been residing in Tuggeranong and they had no lawful reason. A number of persons were arrested for stolen motor vehicle offences and they were again clearly breaching the order. There were some criminal damage, some domestic family violence type, not related, situations.

There was a conscious decision also to charge them with the public health direction because, ultimately, that was the first offence they had committed in that they had actually left where they should have stayed. They should not have been outside the house in the first place; so that was why there was that conscious decision to charge them with that offence.

MS CLAY: We heard some very good feedback from the Human Rights Commissioner earlier that—and this is not your patch probably—in the AMC prison we did a really good job of managing COVID-positive cases to make sure we did not get those bigger outbreaks we have seen in other enclosed environments. She did make quite a lot of comment about the need to keep people who are COVID positive out of the prison system in the first place as an even better preventative. Did ACT Policing factor that in when they were looking at people who were breaching public health directions and making sure that we did not take possible COVID-positive cases into the watch-house and into the prison system?

Mr Gaughan: Absolutely. I cannot speak for the prison system because obviously it is not our decision to put people in jail; it is the decision of the magistrate or the judge. But certainly in relation to the watch-house, we did make a conscious decision, where we could, to exclude from that location people who were COVID positive.

We did have extremely good PPE in place in the watch-house, so we were very confident that, if we did have a positive case, we could deal with it appropriately. But in some instances, we actually had people who were actively avoiding police and who were COVID positive, whom we knew were a potential spreader of that COVID positive situation throughout the community. So, for the benefit of the broader community, we had to interact with those people and bring them into custody.

As Minister Gentleman said, overall I think police acted appropriately but also we had a very compliant community. I do not think we can exclude the fact that vaccination rates are high; we have many people doing the right thing pretty much all the time. So it made our job very easy.

Our officers live and work here. It is a bit unlike many other police jurisdictions, where people probably live 40 or 50 kilometres away from where they work. Our people live in the community. We feel part of the community and we obviously have to make those decisions not just on the benefit for ourselves but the benefit for the broader community.

MS ORR: I think you mentioned there were seven cases where people were charged just for breaches of the health requirements. Hopefully, I have got that right, in amongst all of the very detailed information you have been giving. Can you give us an indication of where people were charged under the health orders alone? What sort of breaches and behaviour were you seeing that led to those charges?

Mr Gaughan: Yes. We had a number of people—particularly when we were at the height, when cases were escalating quite quickly—who were actively avoiding police, who we knew were COVID positive. Through the compliance work that was undertaken by ACT Health, we were given data about people that we were looking to find. Those people were a priority for us. We had in excess of 2½ thousand compliance complaints during the lockdown period—quite a large number. We were actively looking for people, in some instances, for the benefit of the community. It must be said that it was also for the benefit of some of these people, who were not seeking medical advice when they needed to. There was a balance between getting those people into custody as soon as we could and, by the same token, ensuring that, when they were bailed, they were then complying with the health direction.

MS ORR: It was from referrals to you from health authorities, once that education and so forth had been provided as to what they should be doing?

Mr Gaughan: Correct. We were receiving data daily through the HECC. We had a liaison officer there all the time. That has been occurring since the commencement of the COVID pandemic situation last year. The information that we are provided by Health informs us as to what action we need to take next. It is done in partnership. Certainly, if we attended someone's house who was not at home when they should

have been, and we knew they were COVID-positive, it became a priority for us to find them, to protect the community.

MS ORR: How will ACT Policing's activities change now that the restrictions have been eased? Also, as this has been such a trying time for a number of workers' groups, including the police, what supports have been in place for first responders during this pandemic?

Mr Gentleman: Once again, I thank ACT Policing for the work they have been doing during the COVID situation. I have had a discussion with CPO in relation to the latter part of your question, Ms Orr, particularly for staff, to ensure that they can have a bit of a break after this incredible time that we have all had. I understand from CPO now that they are looking at rostering to ensure that some can get away.

We have always had a wellbeing framework in place with ACT Policing, and there are support parameters in there, and wellbeing officers, to keep our police officers in their best sorts, if you like, during these difficult times. I will hand back to CPO to answer this question.

Mr Gaughan: We are reverting to what we are calling COVID-normal, which is basically that COVID is in the community, and we are going to have to live with it. As of 1 December, we will have 10 members still fully engaged in COVID compliance activities. That will primarily be focused on the individuals, who we receive information about from ACT Health, who are no longer home quarantining and are not doing what they should be doing. The positive issue that we need to take forward is looking out for those people who are noncompliant. It is a very small number, but a very important number for us to keep on top of.

In relation to the welfare question, it has been an ongoing thing for us throughout this pandemic. We have had a number of members who have had to quarantine. Simple things like home packages, care packages, have been important for us. Our welfare members put together things that can actually keep people's minds active. Things like puzzles, crossword puzzles and those sorts of things are in the care packages that our welfare officers have been distributing.

Maintaining contact with people has been really important during that quarantine period as well. I have done it twice myself; I know how hard it is, so I can speak from personal experience about the importance of maintaining that mental connection as well as some level of physical activity.

Moving forward, it is important for us to maintain our officer welfare network. We have psychologists in ACT Policing who would play a key role here as well. I am doing pretty much fortnightly videos to our members, trying to connect, because we cannot do things face to face. A lot of the time, it is those small things that are important, and we will continue to do that over the next little while.

Going to your point, the workforce has been really busy realistically since the bushfires, and it is the same with our Health colleagues, and our ACTAS and fire brigade colleagues. We are encouraging people as much as we can to take now until Christmas-time. Obviously, January will potentially be busy for us, so we are really

focused on the next six weeks and giving people as much of a break as we possibly can, and rostering accordingly. It is important for people even to take two days off and take their uniform off. People can travel now. I do not think we can underestimate the fact that people can go to the coast, even for three or four days. That is what we are asking people to do, and people are doing that. We have to get our leave liability down, and I understand that from an economic sense. Importantly, from a welfare perspective, we have to give people a bit of a break, and we are actively encouraging them to do that.

THE CHAIR: Minister, how were ACT Policing's resources managed throughout the lockdown particularly, as well as, obviously, the pandemic response, in terms of juggling the enforcement of any breaches, or any noncompliance with public health directions, versus the very busy regular operations of the police?

Mr Gentleman: You touched on an important question there, Chair. It is incredibly important as to how we manage—in a shift work situation—in an emergency such as we have had. I think police have done an extraordinary job in managing moving away from business as usual to managing COVID across the ACT. Now they are starting to move back into business as usual. They have been able to move resources around, to touch on the health pandemic and assist the community in the best way possible. Of course, we have had the lessening of some statistics in a policing sense as well. We have had much less traffic on the road, which gave the opportunity for police to put more traffic control into border control as well. I will hand over to CPO to give you some more detail on that.

Mr Gaughan: Chair, at the height, we had 110 people attached to the task force. That is not just police officers but some professional staff, particularly in our intelligence areas, to help us to define what the priorities were. I also activated our COVID response plan, which enabled us to make certain decisions at certain times in relation to when our workforce was under critical stress, not just in relation to the numbers that we had deployed but also the numbers of police I had quarantining because of the health emergency. Like everyone else, we had to make decisions in relation to what we were and were not going to do.

Having said that, there has been a substantial reduction in most of the crime types during the lockdown period. I am now referring to data from 1 August to 30 September 2019 and comparing that to 2021. Last year it was very similar in relation to the COVID response, so I think we need to be very cautious about using data from last year as a comparator. There were probably two areas where we saw an increase. One was stolen motor vehicles. We saw an increase, which does surprise me, considering that more people were at home—a slight increase, probably about 10 or so cars stolen during those months. There was also an increase in burglaries of sheds and that sort of stuff—not homes or dwellings, but other locations.

Pretty much all other crime went down, which you would expect, because people are at home and alcohol-fuelled violence and the like was basically non-existent because clubs were not open. With family violence, it was pretty similar for us. I note that some of our support agencies saw an increase. For us, crime went down. We made a conscious decision in relation to what would be our priority responses. I had to maintain a healthy workforce, obviously, to respond to priority 1 and priority 2 jobs.

We did close the front office of the police stations for a short period of time, which I know was somewhat contentious. The police stations were still open; there were still people there and you could still communicate with police. I was trying to lessen public engagement with police officers, particularly as COVID started to spike. For me, it was about force protection and having a police force that could respond to emergencies, and that is what we were able to do.

THE CHAIR: In terms of a practical measure about prioritising, I suppose, because you do have finite resources, could you talk us through what that process was like? Did you have something along the lines of, “Okay, because the task force will be doing compliance checks and isolation checks or whatever, if it’s a matter like this, we’re not going to respond”? What was the process, practically?

Mr Gaughan: I suppose there are a couple of steps to that. The first one was that, because there was basically no night life in Canberra and the pubs and hotels were shut, the territory targeting team, which is a large squad of about 40 or 50 people that normally do that sort of work, shifted to the compliance role in the COVID space.

A lot of our proactive policing that we do in schools and with communities and our public outreach also stopped. Because we did not have that, we were able to reallocate those resources. Our proactive criminal investigations also ceased. We were only responding to the higher-end criminal activity, so we were not doing any deep-dive organised crime investigations or fraud investigations. We were still responding to serious crime, but we were not doing anything proactive, which is exactly what happened in every other jurisdiction in the country.

The other thing was that I gave permission for priority 3 jobs not to be attended if resources were stretched. I wanted to maintain capability to do priority 1 and priority 2. Having said that, the vast majority of priority 3 jobs were still attended to—well over 90 per cent. Certainly, where there was no evidence at a burglary, for instance, of crime scene evidence, permission was given to the operation sergeant not to allocate a vehicle but to take a phone call. Crime was still reported, but the crime was not responded to.

THE CHAIR: Could you give us an example of a priority 3?

Mr Gaughan: Yes, a category 3 would be a house burglary, for instance. That is probably the one that comes to mind immediately. In the normal course of events, there is a four-hour-plus response time. It may have stretched out to longer or indeed we may have determined that we were just going to take a phone call for it.

THE CHAIR: Finally, in moving forward, now that we have had the experience that we have had—we all hope, of course, that we do not have any further outbreaks and lockdowns—is there anything that you have learned from this experience that you would do differently, moving forward?

Mr Gaughan: We would probably take some advice from what has occurred overseas as well. We have a very comprehensive response plan that we are constantly reviewing. Moving forward, would we do things differently? I probably would have

stood up a commander in charge of the COVID task force quicker. We did not do that immediately when we went into lockdown. I would probably do that this time around, if necessary; hopefully, we do not go there.

In this particular instance, Chair, about two weeks after the lockdown started, I obtained an SES band 1 commander from AFP national, who came in to lead the task force. I would move to that much faster. The COVID team is still there now. With respect to having a senior officer in charge, I would bring that person in much quicker than I did last time around.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CLAY: I am interested in the use of the defence forces on our border. I understand that it was always ACT Police with a Defence Force person. I understand that most of our defence people were local so there were quite a lot of protections. Was that done under a specific legislative arrangement? What was the basis on which that was conducted?

Mr Gentleman: We have an arrangement with the commonwealth that AFP and/or ESA can ask for Defence assistance when needed, particularly in an emergency such as we have had. There is a protocol that the CPO uses to engage that. I will pass over to Neil for that protocol.

Mr Gaughan: We were actually engaged with Defence at the very early stages of the pandemic last year. Whilst other jurisdictions, as you would no doubt have seen, moved to border closures and utilising Defence resources in 2020, we did not see the need at that point. We basically had a DACC ready to go that we had been negotiating with Defence as well as ACT Health. When we went into the serious lockdown in 2021, we did not go to Defence and seek additional resources.

You are right: the 23 ADF personnel that we worked with here in the ACT were pretty much all locals. I think they enjoyed the experience of working with ACT Policing. We certainly enjoyed the experience of working with them. Their work involved actual police work. They needed to stop cars and all that sort of thing. They assisted us a lot in putting things together, from a logistics perspective, and so on. It was an initial triage: “Where are you from?” “I’m from New South Wales. The drivers licence shows I am within the 10 postcodes with a reason,” and they move on. If there was anything a bit more complicated than that, obviously the law enforcement kicked into gear and ACT Policing would take charge of that.

The pre-screening of vehicles and enforcement duties were always done with police. It was done in a way that we were able to force multiply and stop many more vehicles on the border than we would have been able to if it were not for their assistance. On one occasion we literally pulled over thousands of vehicles. During the time that we had with Defence, almost 17,000 cars were stopped and 330 vehicles were turned around. Those cars were coming out of Sydney and potentially carrying with them COVID. I think overall it was a very big success.

MS CLAY: Were there any incidents where people did not comply and, in those cases, what was the role of the Defence personnel and what was the role of the police?

Mr Gaughan: I would not say that they did not necessarily not comply; they were non-compliant in that they did not have the relevant information. The only time I remember any dramas with the traffic stop was not when defence were present. That was when two people were arrested for breaching the public health order. That was on the Barton Highway before Defence started. I think overall the presence of Defence— anecdotally, from speaking to members of the community—was welcomed by members of the ACT. Like police, those members of ADF that we had working with us were from the community and the public understood that. It was a good success and I thank defence for their resources.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Given the time, we will wrap it up here. Thank you very much, on behalf of the committee, for attending. I think there was one question taken on notice. The committee secretariat will be in touch with you to liaise about that. You will also be provided a proof transcript so you can check it for accuracy.

Mr Gentleman: Thanks Chair; thank you, members.

Short suspension.

CHEYNE, MS TARA, Assistant Minister for Economic Development, Minister for the Arts, Minister for Business and Better Regulation, Minister for Human Rights and Minister for Multicultural Affairs

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

PERKINS, MS ANITA, Executive Group Manager, Business Support Grants, Economic Development, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

STARICK, MS KATE, Executive Group Manager, Policy and Strategy, Economic Development, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

PRYCE, MR DAVID, Deputy Director-General, Access Canberra, Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

THE CHAIR: I welcome the Minister for Business and Better Regulation and CMTEDD officials. Please be aware that today's proceedings are covered by parliamentary privilege, which provides protection to witnesses but also 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. When you first speak, can you please confirm that you have read and understood the privilege statement? Minister, did you have a short opening statement, just noting the time?

Ms Cheyne: No, Chair.

THE CHAIR: We will go straight into questions. Minister, in your role as minister for business, did you have a role in the establishment or the rollout of any of the business support grant schemes?

Ms Cheyne: I have read and understood the privilege statement. The business support programs were primarily delivered through CMTEDD, with the Chief Minister as the lead in his capacity as Minister for Economic Development.

THE CHAIR: Did you have any role at all though? Was there any engagement that you had in your role as minister for business on those things?

Ms Cheyne: Yes. I was consulted at various points and would often receive briefs for noting.

THE CHAIR: In terms of the ongoing engagement with the business community, did you have a role in that regard?

Ms Cheyne: Yes, absolutely. I think that the day after we went into lockdown we established a group of industry leaders which met daily for at least several weeks before that was reduced to three days a week. I participated and still participate in every single one of those meetings. There were also representatives in those meetings from my office and the Chief Minister's office, as well as directorate officials. That was a primary way of engaging with businesses and sharing information. In addition to that, I have many one-on-one conversations with businesses.

THE CHAIR: We have also heard evidence from the business community earlier in

this inquiry about some businesses facing delays in getting their payments. I think you have also acknowledged some businesses that have been in that situation. Can you give us an update about those engagements and that ongoing engagement that you have just referred to and how that is going?

Ms Cheyne: Sure. I will hand over to Ms Arthy and her team shortly, who have been leading that work. I acknowledge that this is the Chief Minister's portfolio, not mine. But what I can tell you is that we have had very good engagement with businesses. The vast majority of businesses have received at least—the vast, vast majority, and we have those figures for you and we can share those—one payment, if not more, or a top-up payment. There are a few different payment categories, which I understand you are aware of. There are just a handful of businesses now that we are working with on any extra information that we might need in helping to progress those payments. I will ask Ms Arthy and her team to speak to the detail of that for you.

Ms Arthy: I have read and understood the privilege statement. As the minister mentioned, there are now only a small number of the original 11,691 applicants for business support grants. We are down to 71 applications needing to be finalised. Of those, we are waiting on information from 44 businesses for us to be able to progress their application.

We are also starting to process what we are calling the top-up and the tourism accommodation provider, arts and events, entertainment events, hospitality and fitness sector. We have received 1,583 applications for that, and we have paid 675 of those already. So that is moving along. We have also received 131 small business hardship scheme applications. As I say, the vast majority of the business support grants have now been paid. We are just continuing to work with any businesses who contact us if they have any particular issues.

THE CHAIR: Out of the 70-odd that are yet to be processed—and you have mentioned the number that you are waiting on further information from—are they being predicted?

Ms Arthy: I can get more information in general, but usually it is because the applications are really complicated. We have discovered throughout this that the business structures that some businesses have are really complicated for us to work through as to their eligibility. Typically, the ones that are there now are the more complicated ones that we are still trying to work through. There might be some that we reject, there might be duplicates in there but, typically, it is because they are the hardest ones for us to work through and the most complicated.

MS ORR: Minister, I know we have been focusing on the grants as far as support to business goes. Can you also explain to us what other supports have been there and what other work you have done throughout the pandemic to make sure that businesses within the ACT and the business community are supported?

Ms Cheyne: Thank you, Ms Orr. I could go on and on about the number of different supports that we have available, but I will try and keep it brief. As Ms Arthy mentioned, the small business hardship scheme did open on 15 November, so one week ago. We have started to receive the applications for that, but it is open for

several months and provides a significant amount, up to \$10,000, of further support for businesses.

We have the small tourism operator COVID recovery payment. Obviously, our tourism sector was hit very hard, even before we went into lockdown, due to the effects from Sydney. There have been several commercial tenancy supports, the accommodation and tourism venue operator support program, and we have created an outdoor activation task force, which you would be aware of. The Canberra Business Advice and Support Service remains available and offers up to four free hours of support. We also still have other work like CBRIN. Access Canberra has helped assist with a number of fee waivers for business as well. In the interests of time, I might leave it there.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CASTLEY: Just on the hardship scheme, can you clarify something for me? I did get a question about this one. For sole traders who do not necessarily have a commercial rental, like a property—a shopfront, if you will—are they also eligible for rates? Is it a requirement that their business name owns the rent, the rates, the electricity bills and all of that sort of stuff?

Ms Cheyne: I will ask Ms Arthy to respond to that.

Ms Arthy: Ms Perkins might be able to answer it. If not, I may have to take that one on notice. Given the various rates and rebate programs that are around, it is a little complicated as to how we work out who is eligible or not.

Ms Perkins: I have read and understood the privilege statement. For the small business hardship scheme and the reimbursements that businesses are claiming, they do need to be in their business name in order to be able to claim the reimbursement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for that.

MS ORR: I want to go back and ask about the Access Canberra queues that we have seen. We know there have been some issues with queuing, particularly as the shopfronts have opened back up. What has been done to manage this and to make sure this is not an ongoing concern?

Ms Cheyne: As you are aware, there are five Access Canberra shopfronts: Belconnen, Gungahlin, Woden, Dickson and Tuggeranong. They were shut for a good deal of the lockdown. We then did a staged reopening where Belconnen and Tuggeranong, and then later Woden, reopened for booked appointments only. Initially, that had a focus on cases that were urgent or where it was to assist an essential worker. Eventually we opened that up to everybody. That was before the reopening of four of the five centres in their normal operations. Dickson is also open, but only for its land title operations.

Those four service centres have been open for a little while now, and we have seen some queues due to some of that build-up in demand. We have been supporting people who have been queuing in a few different ways. One involved some of our senior service operators walking the lines and talking with staff. Some weeks ago we

provided them with their ticket number so that they had that ready to go and we knew what sort of transaction they were after. We also supplied things like bottled water and sunscreen and assisted people who might have mobility issues or were elderly. Where standing might have been an issue, we were able to offer them seating, usually inside.

What we did—first as a trial, but I can now confirm that this is at all four Access Canberra shopfronts—was mobile queuing. This allows people who are attending a service centre to scan a QR code, which we are all familiar with doing now, and that allows them to virtually join the queue. They can then leave the queue to wait at a nearby cafe or shop—if you are in Belconnen, you can perhaps go and sit in Margaret Timpson Park—before they are notified by SMS when it is their time to enter the service centre. Some people do still choose to stay in line, but feedback has been really positive on that so far. If a community member does not have a smartphone, a paper ticket has been issued to manage their place in the queue. We are still refining the process, and we are working with the vendor on it, but we are pleased with how that engagement has gone so far. But I will just see if Mr Pryce has anything further to add.

Mr Pryce: Chair, I have read the privilege statement and understand it. Thank you, Ms Orr, for the question. In addition to what the minister just said, I just want to point out that, except for Gungahlin service centre, which is operating at full counter capacity, we have reduced counters operating at the other ones. That is just due to density requirements. Other than that, we have been getting through as many people as we can and, in fact, our performance is showing that we are virtually serving the same number of customers as we did this time last year, despite those challenges we still face with COVID-19. So that is good.

The QR system is building on our system when people would normally just come in and physically grab a ticket and wait in our service centre. It is to expand the ability so that people have the option, if they wish to use our service, as the minister said, to not have to physically stand in a queue. Obviously, as we lead into summer—probably not while the weather is so overcast and rainy as it has been, but as it gets warmer—it will provide more options for our people. We are hoping to build on that capability. It is a new and innovative trial that we are testing, but I am hoping that we will be able to build on that into the future as part of our general service offering ongoing just because of the benefit it provides.

Ms Cheyne: I think the latest statistics I have are that wait times, I think in Tuggeranong last week, were as low as nine minutes, but generally it was about an hour. They are still coming down from where we have seen them in previous weeks. But, as Mr Pryce said, in terms of the number of people that we are serving, even with those density restrictions in place, it has been really pleasing to see that it is up on where it was last year when we did not necessarily have those in place.

MS ORR: Thank you.

MS CLAY: Minister, it has been a huge year of change for businesses. I think COVID has accelerated some of the things that were already happening, with a greater switch to the online environment and a lot of shifting work patterns. Have you

had a chance yet to get a sense of some of the permanent changes that have come from this that will affect our businesses? What role you see government playing in helping people through that transition?

Ms Cheyne: There are a few bits to that. Something that we have a firm eye on, and are keen to try to balance, is with the return to work and the physical return to work for people—making sure that we are doing that in a way that works for people and their different arrangements, noting that some people potentially had cancelled their child care for the rest of the year.

Also, people are responding to coming out of lockdown in very different ways, and we do need to balance that. We are very aware of what we have seen overseas in terms of what has been termed the great resignation. That is what we need to keep firmly in mind as well—supporting our workforce. Supporting our workforce helps us to support the broader community. That has been firmly front of mind in some of my considerations.

In terms of some of the permanent positive changes in supporting businesses, while we still have a really firm focus—particularly as we head to the end of this calendar year—on the business support payments and what we can do there, we now find ourselves in a situation where businesses have engaged with government more than they ever have in history, particularly here in the ACT. We have welcomed that engagement. It has been very good.

Through the pandemic, we have been building on our channels regarding how we engage with business. One example is that we have a business e-newsletter. It is not a spam e-newsletter; it is an e-newsletter that has important information for businesses, and we have generally been sending it out about once a week. Before we went into lockdown, we had 1,300 businesses subscribe to that; now we have 8,000. That is obviously a real opportunity for us in how we can continue to engage with businesses.

Just prior to the pandemic, we also updated our business page to be a real business hub. There is a lot of information there for businesses. Since 13 August, the day after lockdown, it has had 350,000 unique page views. I hope that businesses do have it bookmarked. We are regularly providing new information there, including the new grants that we announced last week.

We have also taken more of a whole-of-government approach to how we have been engaging with businesses. That includes with some of the compliance activities, but also with things like the outdoor activation task force and the steering committees associated with that. We are trying to provide that no-wrong-door approach.

As we move out of this intensive period of support, there are some real opportunities for us as a government, and government working with business, to engage in different and new ways and to build on that period of engagement that we have had over this time.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, I have a question about the Business Recovery and Transition Forum. You mentioned that you are limiting the business traders to two people per meeting. Why did you choose to limit them? How often does the forum

meet?

Ms Cheyne: The forum meets once a week, on Friday. It has been meeting for an hour, but we may need to extend that time, as we have a few issues to cover on our agenda for the coming weeks. In terms of the traders, it is not a big group, and particularly given the limits on everybody's time, we have tried to keep it to numbers that are manageable.

All of the traders who want to participate can do so. With respect to the way that we are doing that, so that we are able to hear from everybody, we are cycling who appears. On one week, the Phillip and Mitchell traders appear and, on the second week, the Fyshwick and Braddon traders appear. They, of course, engage with us individually as well. It is about trying to achieve a balance.

MS CASTLEY: Will the discussions of these forums be made public?

Ms Cheyne: I do not believe so, no.

THE CHAIR: Just to follow up on Ms Castley's question, Minister, do you attend those personally?

Ms Cheyne: Yes, I chair them.

THE CHAIR: What has been the feedback so far in terms of what the businesses are seeking as we move forward to what the CPO called the COVID-normal?

Ms Cheyne: The feedback that we have had has been broad. There are still a number of issues that we are working through. The number one issue a few weeks ago was restrictions and whether they were going to ease. That is obviously not one of the key topics of conversation now.

It has been about some of what we have just touched on—the opportunities that we have going forward, how we can be communicating, what businesses might be communicating that government is doing and how to make use of those channels that we are talking about. We have seen quite a bit of commentary in the other states about vaccination status; that is certainly on our forward agenda.

Also, there are other opportunities for business to make the most of things, including briefing from the outdoor activation task force, as well as from Events ACT, because as we emerge out of lockdown, and as we do have an events community that has also been hit really hard, we want to make sure we are providing businesses with opportunities to engage, and make sure that they are aware of that as well.

THE CHAIR: I want to take you to—I know it is recently announced—the Workforce Attraction Cooperative Grants Program. Can you outline how the sum of \$172,000 was arrived at?

Ms Cheyne: I will ask the officials from the economic development directorate to assist.

Ms Arthy: This is under the Chief Minister's portfolio. It was simply part of the broader budget discussions and budget decisions when we were looking at what funding was available under the Future Jobs Fund, what the other calls were, and what we believed we were able to commit to rolling out this year, while noting that economic development were fairly tied up with all of the business support grants as well. It is part of the general budget discussions.

THE CHAIR: In terms of the eligibility for people who can apply for this grant, can you take us through that process, just briefly?

Ms Arthy: I will hand over to Ms Starick, who is the executive group manager responsible for this program.

Ms Starick: I have read and understand the privilege statement. With the eligibility criteria, I will start by saying that, as far as possible, we have tried to align eligibility criteria with our grants programs to minimise confusion for applicants and businesses, but there are some differences.

Effectively, the cooperative grants program is looking for businesses to partner, to come up with ideas to attract the workforce that they need to reopen and grow. We are looking for businesses to partner with other businesses, or in some instances industry bodies. The businesses need to be registered in the ACT or they could be registered elsewhere but need to demonstrate that they are primarily located in the ACT.

Given that it is a collaborative grant round and there could be two or more partners, we have kept it open so that if a business operates in the immediate region, they could be considered as part of the cohort in the application. But the lead business must be located in the ACT.

There are a number of requirements. They need to demonstrate that they will be able to deliver the program that we require. Because it is a competitive grant round, they will need also to be able to demonstrate that their proposal is meeting the need of a high-growth industry or sector within the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Finally, because I note the time, is there an assessment process, a review mechanism at the end of it, to say, "You didn't meet the capability that was the purpose of this grant"? What happens then? Is there some kind of "touch base" at some point?

Ms Starick: There are touch bases throughout. We, in the guidelines, encourage the interested parties to contact us and talk through what it is that they are proposing. There will be an assessment process. As a matter of course, we do go back to people who were not successful as well, to provide them with feedback on their application.

Ms Cheyne: Ms Lee, if it is useful to the committee, we can make a copy of the guidelines available. They do require successful applicants to report against KPIs and outcomes of their activities, as specified in their agreement with the grant.

THE CHAIR: That is great; if you could, that would be fantastic. Thank you, Minister.

Thank you very much, Minister and officials, for attending and assisting the committee with its inquiry. I do not think there were any questions taken on notice. The committee secretary will provide you with a proof copy of the transcript, to check for accuracy. On behalf of the committee, this was our final public hearing. I thank all of the witnesses that appeared today and at every public hearing. We will now close this public hearing.

The committee adjourned at 5.01 pm.