



# LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

13<sup>th</sup> Assembly

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

### Public Hearing Transcript

Thursday 30 April 2020

Litchfield Room

**Members:**

Mrs Kate Worden MLA, Chair, Member for Sanderson  
Mr Terry Mills MLA, Deputy Chair, Member for Blain  
Mr Gerry Wood MLA, Member for Nelson  
Mr Tony Sievers MLA, Member for Brennan  
Mr Lawrence Costa MLA, Member for Arafura  
Mr Gary Higgins MLA, Member for Daly (via videoconference)

**Participating  
Member:**

Mrs Lia Finocchiaro MLA, Member for Spillet

**Witnesses:**

Hon Michael Gunner MLA, Chief Minister  
Hon Nicole Manison MLA, Deputy Chief Minister and Treasurer  
Hon Natasha Fyles MLA, Minister for Health  
Mr Jamie Chalker APM, Commissioner for Police and Chief Executive Officer,  
Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services  
Ms Jodie Ryan, Chief Executive Officer, Department of the Chief Minister  
Mr Andrew Cowan, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Department of the Chief  
Minister  
Professor Catherine Stoddart, Chief Executive, Department of Health  
Dr Hugh Heggie, Chief Health Officer, Department of Health

The committee convened at 2.00 pm.

## **PUBLIC HEARING ON COVID-19 AND TERRITORY FINANCES**

**Madam CHAIR:** Good afternoon. As the Chair of the committee, I formally declare this public hearing with the Territory Security and Emergency Management Subcommittee—SEMESC—of Cabinet on the Territory's COVID-19 response open.

I welcome the Chief Minister, the Deputy Chief Minister, the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Ms Ryan, the Police Commissioner, Professor Stoddart, Mr Drabsch, Mr Graham and all other contributors for appearing today and over the coming months.

I acknowledge that we are gathering this afternoon on the land of the Larrakia people and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

This hearing is being held in accordance with a resolution of the Assembly of 24 April 2020, which was made as a consequence of the presence of COVID-19 in Australia and the delay of the federal and Territory budgets.

I take one moment and, for the record, I invite my colleagues here to introduce themselves briefly.

**Mr WOOD:** Gerry Wood, Independent Member for Nelson.

**Mr SIEVERS:** Tony Sievers, the Member for Brennan.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Lia Finocchiaro, Opposition Leader.

**Mr MILLS:** Terry Mills, Member for Blain.

**Mr COSTA:** Lawrence Costa, Member for Arafura.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Gary Higgins, Member for Daly, Deputy Leader of the Opposition.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you. These circumstances require extraordinary action which, in a democratic society, also requires rigorous scrutiny. The committee, therefore, welcomed the Chief Minister's proposal to hold these monthly hearings to enable the committee to question the key decision-makers for the Territory's response.

The hearing is being webcast and the *Hansard* transcript will be placed on the Public Accounts Committee web page. Questions taken on notice and their answers will also be placed on the committee's web page.

I note that all questions are to be directed in the first instance to the Chief Minister, who may then refer those questions to where required. As with estimates, I ask that all questions on notice are repeated to ensure they are clear and allocated a number.

Sessional Order 16 allows members who are not members of the committee to participate in this hearing at the discretion of our committee. Physical distancing requirements, as you can see, mean that such participation can only occur by a member of the committee giving their seat to other members or by a member calling in to the meeting. As the Chair, I fully expect orderly participation by all members.

I want to be really clear that this session is not a replacement for estimates. Estimates takes the public sector and ministers a number of months to prepare full financial data. It would be unrealistic of this committee to expect that level of detail.

This hearing is also not a free-for-all. To clarify this further, for our first of four meetings, PAC members have agreed to ask questions in line with the circulated agenda today. I will call on questions under the agenda items and ask members to prioritise their questions to allow us to cover all these areas within the time limits we have.

I think everyone will agree that two hours is not a great deal of time, so I will be ruling on questions as we go. Whilst I appreciate the interest other members in parliament have taken in these hearings, I will be prioritising the questions of PAC members unless they have officially substituted with other members.

I ask all those participating, for the sake of the *Hansard*, to state your name before first responding. Chief Minister, before we proceed to questions, would both you and the Territory Controller each like to make a brief opening statement?

**Mr WOOD:** Excuse me, Madam Chair, I ask that item nine be placed on the agenda.

**Madam CHAIR:** Yes. Does everybody have an agenda? An additional item—nine—has been added, simply noted as 'Treasury'. They have a couple of broader questions for Treasury.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Madam Chair, I question the ability for the committee to create an agenda by which to control today's meeting. We have a motion of the Assembly that was agreed to and passed by the Assembly. It is a very broad motion and it makes no mention of any category or order of category in which our questions have to be prescribed to today. We have two hours ...

**Madam CHAIR:** With respect, Leader of the Opposition, the PAC met and that agreement was made. You have a member in that committee so ...

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** I understand that but I am questioning the validity of that, Madam Chair. The motion says that the Public Accounts Committee will convene today to hold a hearing with the Security and Emergency Management Subcommittee of Cabinet in attendance, in addition—dot, dot, dot—will be the Under Treasurer and the meeting should go for two hours. I see no reason why we need to have an agenda prescribed to us. It is two hours; we are adults. You have just said this is not estimates. If it were estimates we would be going output by output.

**Mr GUNNER:** Which is an agenda.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** So why do we need an agenda?

**Madam CHAIR:** This is the ruling. My role here as the Chair is to conduct an orderly hearing. This is the way the first one is to be conducted.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Why is that?

**Madam CHAIR:** That is fine. Participating members of the PAC—if you would like to make a ruling, I could make a ruling.

**Mr GUNNER:** Chair can I seek a point of clarification? As I understand it at the moment a non-member of the Public Accounts Committee is challenging a decision of the Public Accounts Committee about how the Public Accounts Committee conducts its business, is that correct?

**Madam CHAIR:** Correct, Chief Minister. I am just addressing that directly. If the Leader of the Opposition, as a non-member of the PAC, wishes to challenge that I am happy to put that to a vote.

**Mr MILLS:** I am a member of the PAC, when did we agree to these categories and these lists?

**Madam CHAIR:** At our last meeting. It was circulated for comment, came back and was published.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Is this agenda a public document?

**Madam CHAIR:** It certainly is.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** As of when?

**Madam CHAIR:** I am just going to make a ruling. We have two hours. I will go back to the Chief Minister to make a brief opening statement ...

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Can I just further clarify are we allowed to ask questions of the Chief Minister's statements as we would in estimates?

**Madam CHAIR:** As long as it relates to the statement, yes.

Please proceed Chief Minister.

**Mr GUNNER:** Thank you Chair. I am very much aware of the agenda, so if questions come up that fall to the agenda from the opening statement, I will refer them back to the agenda.

I thank the Public Accounts Committee for agreeing to hold these meetings in these uncertain times. We need to provide as much certainty as we can, when we can. That means providing as much information as we can. It is for that reason I wrote to you with this request.

Today, I provide a brief overview of the work we have done to protect Territorians from the threat of Coronavirus. The Territory Controller will also give an opening statement before we take your questions. Our work has been focused on two objectives. The first is saving lives, the second is saving jobs. Before I explain our work, it is important to understand the architecture of our decision-making.

The Security and Emergency Management Subcommittee of Cabinet, SEMSC, is formally responsible for decision-making when a public emergency is declared. Since 14 March we have held 23 meetings. I Chair this committee and am joined by the Treasurer and Police minister, Minister Manison; the Attorney-General and Health minister, Minister Fyles; the Commissioner of Police; and the chief executives of the departments of the Chief Minister; Health; and Trade, Business and Innovation. For the purpose of these hearings I have also asked the Under Treasurer of the Department of Treasury and Finance to join us.

The Territory Emergency Management Committee, TEMC, is the operational decision-making body that reports to the SEMSC.

Finally, the Emergency Operations Centre is the central command point for the implementation of our emergency management work. Officials from across government have been co-opted into the EOC situated at Hidden Valley to best respond to the emergency in real time.

In addition, many public servants have been redirected from their day jobs to help support the emergency response. I thank all the dedicated public servants for their tireless around-the-clock work over seven long weeks.

For the Chair and committee members, it feels like this crisis has given us all a lifetime worth of challenges and changes. It was just under seven weeks ago that I met with the Prime Minister and other leaders in Sydney for what we first thought would be a fairly routine COAG meeting. It ended up being anything but routine.

At that meeting we agreed to form the National Cabinet to coordinate a national response to the outbreak guided by the expert advice of the nation's chief health and medical officers. We have had 14 National Cabinet meetings since 15 March.

At the time of COAG there was just one positive case in the Territory. But given the risk Coronavirus posed, the risk to the Territory was possibly the greatest in the nation. We knew we had to do everything in our power to stay the safest place in the nation. It is all about staying ahead of the game. From that point our around-the-clock work was guided by a simple motto: whatever it takes.

Our work to save lives essentially had three components: social distancing measures, which included restrictions or temporary closure for many businesses; protecting remote communities; and securing our borders.

The decision to restrict or temporarily close businesses was a gut-wrenching one, but the results speak for themselves. We have now had 24 days without a new case and, as of today, there are only three active cases.

Because of this success we have made the Territory the safest place in Australia. We can now gradually adjust restrictions ahead of the rest of Australia. I announced today that, from tomorrow, Territorians will be able to participate in a range of outdoor activities. From 15 May 2020, simple indoor events will be allowed, with a range of things, including many businesses. From 5 June, more complex indoor activities of more than two hours can commence, again including a range of businesses. Key principles will still apply, including personal community responsibility, physical distancing and proper hygiene.

With remote communities—it is important we remember our remote communities, always—the Territory took unilateral action to ban all non-essential travel to remote communities, acting first and acting fast to protect some of the most vulnerable people in the nation. Following that action, the National Cabinet agreed that the Commonwealth *Biosecurity Act* be used to restrict travel in to and out of remote communities.

I confirmed with the federal government that all 76 remote communities in the Northern Territory, which asked to be protected, have the act applied to them as requested by the land councils and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. That added an extra layer of protection for remote residents.

We have a hotline that has been set up to manage remote travel inquiries manned by 15 staff, seven days a week, who have taken over 12 700 phone calls. Prior to the implementation of the biosecurity border, 2222 people accessed the return-to-community program on the basis that their home community was the safest place to be.

On help hotlines, we have had one for the Chief Health Officer exemptions—over 6500 phone calls. The COVID-19 public information hotline received over 12 000 phone calls. The COVID-19 medical hotline received over 1900 calls and our events and gatherings hotline dealt with over 600 calls. That is in addition to the many thousands of phone calls and emails through regular channels we have received over the last seven weeks.

The decision to secure the Territory's borders, effectively closing them to non-Territorians, has been our strongest weapon in the fight against the spread of Coronavirus. On Tuesday 24 March, our first domestic restrictions began, requiring all arrivals to self-quarantine for 14 days, with tough penalties for the few who broke this rule. At the end of that week, we introduced forced quarantine for international arrivals. The following week, we extended that to all arrivals. Daily arrivals to the Territory dropped when quarantine measures for international arrivals were introduced, dropped faster when quarantine measures for interstate arrivals were introduced and plummeted when we introduced mandatory-forced quarantine for all arrivals.

Police and environmental health officers worked around the clock, making compliance checks. The numbers showed that the overwhelming majority, more than 99 % of people, did the right thing. More than 6300 compliance checks have been undertaken with 42 infringements issued. We also have around 300 people still in forced quarantine.

I take this opportunity to provide an update on an evolving Australian Defence Force situation. We thank the ADF; it has helped us secure our borders. I have been advised that four ADF personnel based in the Northern Territory are expected to return to Australia tomorrow on an ADF sustainment flight. These four members will be isolated at Robertson Barracks in Darwin. All ADF members are required to remain in quarantine or isolation until medically cleared.

The ADF members returning to Darwin will be transferred from RAAF Base Darwin to Robertson Barracks by the ADF, in accordance with all health and safety requirements. The ADF members will remain in isolation from the Northern Territory community during this transfer process. As always, we stand ready to assist our fellow Australians in times of need and we hope they recover from the Coronavirus.

Just as we continued to scale up our health and safety measures, we had to drastically scale up our economic measures to save jobs. We announced our tourism resilience package in February, the first in this measure. On 18 March, we announced the Jobs Rescue and Recovery package, which included the BIG, IWG and the expanded HIS. We have received 1420 applications to the BIG. The Immediate Works Grants was fully subscribed with 100 applications. The Home Improvement Scheme was extended and expanded beyond the original announcement.

Assessments have begun on the more than 19 500 applications, with 295 already approved at a value of over \$2m. A week after the Jobs Rescue and Recovery package, we released our Small Business Survival Fund—\$50m. To date, 409 Territory businesses have been approved for the fund, with \$8.6m survival payments paid. Two days later, we launched the Territory Jobs Hub to connect people who have lost jobs. Industries still need workers. So far it has employed or connected 652 newly unemployed people with jobs.

The following week, the Worker and Wellbeing Fund was launched. By the end of the week, we will have allocated over \$700 000 to a number of NGOs to support more than 150 people. We have had over 1000 enquiries and been in contact with over 1000 people. This fund was particularly beneficial to international students. We recognise their plight in this.

The week after that, we announced our business hardship package with reduced payroll tax, reduced power and water bills, incentives for commercial landlords and we worked with councils to reduce rates, and so on.

Madam Chair, I have outlined a lot of the economic measures we undertook over the last 10 weeks and look forward to the committee's questions on these decisions to save lives and to save jobs. I have always said that I will do whatever it takes to protect Territorians, to save lives and to save jobs. I would rather be criticised for doing too much than doing too little. I am not aware of anyone saying we should have done less but if people think I should have done less or if anyone thinks I have done too much, I am happy to hear their case today and what they would have not done.

**Madam CHAIR:** (Inaudible – microphone off) questions on your opening statement.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Madam Chair, can we not ask questions on the opening statement, like you said before?

**Madam CHAIR:** (Inaudible.) I have to go to members first. Do you have any questions (inaudible)?

**Mr WOOD:** You mentioned returning to country. A complaint was sent to me—I think the minister for Police and others also got it—about serious antisocial behaviour behind the new Bunnings site in Palmerston. Why are people still camping in those areas? Has the government looked at that issue and, under the emergency provisions, can people be sent back to their country and be told they cannot return during that period? I am concerned about the violence, lack of social distancing and welfare of children in that area.

**Mr GUNNER:** Police have done a lot of work enforcing the Chief Health Officer's directions for gatherings. I will pass to the Territory Controller to take the rest of the question but we are very much aware of the issue. We cannot force people to go back to community; that was discussed in that past. We asked a lot of people to go back to community because it is a safe place to be and we are worried about people who are vulnerable. That includes people who live rough. It would be fair to say that people who live rough are potentially more susceptible to Coronavirus. We worked carefully there and got a lot of people back home safely.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** We have a heavy focus on those who choose to sleep rough. The numbers have diminished significantly since the body of work commenced for our response to COVID-19. That allowed us to engage with a cadre of people who we now identify as being rough sleepers who choose that lifestyle. Under the direction of the licensing director, we managed to minimise the availability of alcohol to those who do not have a principle place of residence or a bona fide place to consume.

We had a heavy focus on the observations of the Chief Health Officer who observed large groups gathering, not adhering to physical distancing and sharing drinking containers, which caused a high level of concern. We had a heavy focus continually, not only in Darwin, but across our major centres in that regard. There are high levels of engagement. Antisocial behaviour and disturbance have reports dropped markedly, so we know there was a significant shift in the public domain at the moment in relation to that type of behaviour.

We always approach this from an educational approach. We do not want to be enforcing to the point of litigation at every step. We would much rather raise awareness and ensure people have a high level of understanding, particularly with where we were seven weeks ago—the risk of this invisible illness and the detrimental impacts it can have.

I appreciate that we will always have isolated incidents, but for the large proportion, we reduced those attendances considerably and maintained a high level of engagement with those who choose to live that way.

**Mr MILLS:** Without doubt, the community generally have a view that you and your team have done an excellent job. It appears that we are moving into a new phase. I listened to your statement and have the schedule in front of me. There is a question that is not allowed to be discussed. Can you please describe how you will allow Territorians to gain an insight into the financial position of the Northern Territory as a result of the response to the Coronavirus? What mechanisms do you have in place given that there is no budget and you are determined to go to the election in August?

**Mr GUNNER:** I answered that question a number of times and am happy to go over it again. Obviously, we will know what we have done and the only difference between the mid-year report and now is our response to the Coronavirus, which we have been very public about. What we do not know—and the reason the Australian Government deferred its budget and the Reserve Bank made similar comments—is what our revenue will be. Seventy per cent of the Territory government's budget comes from the Australian

Government, which hands its budget down in October; that is when it will have the certainty to know revenue streams, allowing us to responsibly have our budget in November.

What we can articulate to Territorians before the election—and they will know what we know and we will know what they know—is what we spent. There will be an end of financial year document we can release, which normally comes out six weeks after the end of a quarter. In mid-May we will have the documents for three-quarters of the year. I said today it would be mid- to late-July for that next lot of quarterlies, which is the end of financial year statement.

In saying that, my understanding is that I have caused a lot of heartburn in Treasury because that is a significant amount of work. But if we can deliver that, it would be a very reasonable time frame to be able to report on what happened to the end of financial year.

The mid-May quarterlies, which go until the end of March, will only show a bit of the Coronavirus impact; the major impacts will probably be through April. The end of financial year statements will more clearly show what we have done. I have been completely up front with Territorians. The only difference between mid-year and now is our response to Coronavirus. We have told Territorians what we have done. The bit I cannot answer, that no one can answer—the federal Treasurer cannot answer—is what the situation will be with revenue.

If you look at the Australian Government, it made a \$130bn announcement with JobKeeper. That is just one announcement. It was a staggering and unbudgeted announcement. We do not know yet how that will be dealt with in the budget in October—from borrowings or austerity measures. No one knows. I do not think the Australian Government has made that decision yet.

There is a lot of information we do not have. I have been up front with Territorians about that. I can tell you what we have done. What I cannot tell you is what our revenue will be. No one can tell you what their revenues will be. No territory or state government can do that; the Prime Minister cannot do that. They will know in October when they do their budget work.

After the election, whoever is in government, will have the responsibility of delivering that budget based on the information that we get.

**Mr HIGGINS:** On the answer we just got about actual expenditure et cetera, when we have been looking at the health impact of this, a lot of different scenarios have been announced and some of the results have been made public. I am talking about doing modelling under different scenarios. Surely, with our budget, we can do that. I think that is probably more a question for Treasury.

**Mr GUNNER:** I can talk to that. That is a question we put directly at National Cabinet to the Reserve Bank Governor and the federal Secretary of the Treasury. There are a couple of things. First of all, the experts on the medical side who did that modelling have said very clearly that it was not a prediction. They have always been very clear about explaining that distinction. If you like, we can get Hugh Heggie, Chief Health Officer, to explain the difference between modelling and prediction. First of all, it is a model not a prediction.

The Reserve Bank Governor was asked this question directly during one of the National Cabinets. I apologise to him and the National Cabinet if this is talking out of school, but we asked if he could give us some kind of forecasting. He said that it is impossible without knowing the health impacts; health dictates the economy. If you can tell me if America will be in lockdown in a month's time, or when planes are going to fly again—if you can give me that information, I can do some economic forecasting. I cannot do that right now. He point blank ruled it out. It is all because the Coronavirus—and I think we get this—dictates the rest.

First of all, the way you describe medical modelling is not how you would base a budget. Secondly, when we asked the Reserve Bank Governor for some level of information about where things might be going, he said that he could not do that until there was greater clarity and certainty on the Coronavirus situation.

I would love if the Territory economy sat out on its own and was not part of what the rest of the country or the rest of the world was doing, but it is not. We are reliant on our fellow Australians if we think about the GST pool. The amount of money we get from GST is dependent on what Sydneysiders spend, really. The Australian economy is very much dependent upon our international trade connections and planes are not flying at the moment.

I do not know when the Territory borders will be lifted. The Prime Minister will not be able to tell you when the national borders will be lifted. There are a lot of things we do not know right now. That is why the Australian

Government has pegged its budget to October and we have pegged our budget to November as a result of the Australian Government's decision. There are just a lot of things that are not known right now.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Chief Minister, in the opening statement you talk about 15 staff working seven days a week and you went through some other phone services. You made an announcement that we have spent \$400m on the Coronavirus and, I think, \$300m is additional money you are injecting into boosting the economy and \$100m is out of payroll tax savings.

I know they are estimates but when we talk about additional staff and phone lines that are being set-up, is that part of the \$400m or is it coming out of redeployed staff within the public service who are already covered? In other words, are the additional Internet and phones we are setting up part of the \$400m or are they coming out of normal public service day-to-costs with people in the public service who may, because of this problem, have less work at the moment?

**Mr GUNNER:** The \$400m is essentially a mixture of revenue forgone—or money we are not making—and money we have chosen to spend to keep the economy going. That is separate to the operational decisions we made about how we operate our hotlines. That has managed from overs and unders—to use parlance, overspends and underspends. The hotlines cost money that was not budgeted for but we found savings in other places, like travel returns.

Treasury is still doing the work of adding up those figures. The CEO of DCM touched upon some of the work that government has done to manage the operational levers.

**Ms RYAN:** The remote hotline that the Chief Minister referenced in his opening statement sits in the Department of the Chief Minister. We decided that we should set that up and put three people in charge of some phones and ended up with 15 FTE—they are not 15 people working seven days a week—with 12 000 phone calls. We have redeployed other people within the agency. They are not doing their 'day job'; they are doing this and other people in DCM have picked up the balance of the responsibilities that need to happen.

Through this crisis a lot of people have stepped up and taken on extra responsibility. There will be some overtime costs, but there are things we are not doing. For example, protocol sits in the Department of the Chief Minister and there have been no events at Parliament House for seven weeks, so we have saved money there. Public servants have not been traveling since the beginning, so there are savings.

We looked specifically at the DCM budget and think we will probably be around about where we expected to be. We will spend more on Coronavirus but will be saving in other areas. I suspect that will be the same for many departments. We are obviously all still working through that.

In some departments it will be a lot more. Police; Health; and Trade, Business and Innovation have had to gear up substantially.

**Mr GUNNER:** Member for Daly, would you like us to go to the Territory Controller to answer that question from a different point of view? That was a DCM answer on the hotlines. The Police Commissioner can talk about what the police have done and how they have essentially had to push it up to be able to deal with this.

**Mr HIGGINS:** I have a question for the Commissioner, which would probably give him the in to give some answers on this. On the opening statement, you mentioned the biosecurity ...

**Madam CHAIR:** Hang on, Member for Daly, this is on the Chief Minister's opening statement. We have not actually allowed the Territory Controller to give his opening statement yet ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** He has answered questions already.

**Madam CHAIR:** No, I understand that, Opposition Leader, but do we want to give him an opportunity to make an opening statement and then we can ...

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** No, we want to finish asking the Chief Minister questions ...

**Madam CHAIR:** Opposition Leader, I remind you that you are an invited guest—in fact, a visitor—for this hearing. You must go through the Chair. I am trying to sort something out with the Member for Daly and I expect you to have some respect.



Member for Daly, would you be okay for the Commissioner to make a small opening statement and then ask him his question?

**Mr HIGGINS:** The question more relates to the Chief Minister's opening statement and a comment he had that I felt he may ...

**Madam CHAIR:** Perhaps you could address the question to the Chief Minister and he can then ask the Police Commissioner to respond.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Chief Minister, in the opening statement you mentioned the Commonwealth using the *Biosecurity Act*. The concern from a lot of people is that the land councils—and I am asking whether this is correct—can issue exemptions on that, so that people in these areas can come in and out without being restricted in the same way that other people may be. Is that the case?

**Mr GUNNER:** I am hesitant to say yes, because there are a lot of misunderstandings about how this works and I do not want an answer to be taken and misconstrued. There have been a lot of accusations. I was discussing with the Commissioner earlier about whether police have special exemptions—or Aboriginal people in a remote biosecurity area have special exemptions—going back and forth in some kind of free-for-all across the border—there is not.

Land councils have some delegated authority there, but I think it is clearer to explain that it is being done in a very responsible way. The Territory Controller gave the example today of Jabiru. I will pass to him in a minute to add about that.

But it is important—obviously we are getting down the track here—to let the Territory Controller make some opening comments. He has been doing a lot of work. I will pass to the Commissioner to answer the question about how that works. He also has—later on we will get to it in the agenda—Andy Cowan, who has been doing a lot of this work in partnership with the land councils about how those borders work.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** Each land council—and some other people have been identified as decision-makers as it relates to the biosecurity declared zones and the entry to return to those. It is important to state up front that as it relates to the biosecurity zones, there is no limitation on any individual to leave those zones. The limitation is their ability to return without having respect to 14 days.

We had to ensure there were supply chains and that people have access to medical services. Communities that do not have a sustainable supply chain—as it relates to a community store—obliged certain people to have to come to the major centres to undertake their business.

Early on, given that it is Commonwealth legislation and the Department of the Chief Minister and other elements of government were working on this collectively, we worked on whether it was necessarily a perfect fit for the Northern Territory. We determined that the most appropriate means to establish declared zones was following the local government boundaries because they were relatively consistent in how we could ensure people were maintaining relevant contact, undertake their various traditional practices and have cultural relationships with those still in their declared zones.

The relevant land councils were our point of contact for those decision-making determinations. We continued to assess and evaluate them in conjunction with them. We also sought further exemptions and changes to the declared zones by seeking formal variations by the federal Health Minister. That occurred specifically for Alice Springs, where we have the Amoonguna community, as well as the lots known colloquially as the Golden Mile, which rely on the Alice Springs area as their service hub. That diminished quite a lot of the bureaucratic approvals that were required. We have been quite adept at monitoring and being able to move that around.

There has been all manner of rumours of carte blanche awarding of exemptions. That is just not true and not sustained in the statistics. We also had to try to balance that with what was fair, reasonable and practical.

As it stands to date, we have in excess of, I think, 150 people who are currently in quarantine and awaiting return into biosecurity zones. We know there is an effectiveness to what we are doing.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you. I ...

**Mr MILLS:** Madam Chair, I have a supplementary. I know it is ...

**Madam CHAIR:** For this particular topic?

**Mr MILLS:** No. My original question, but I allowed others to go ...

**Madam CHAIR:** Yes. I note that the Member for Arafura has not had a question on the opening statement. I want to check in. No questions? Member for Brennan, do you have a question on that. I said I would go the PAC members first. Make it quick, please.

**Mr SIEVERS:** Chief Minister, I want to say what a great job you are all doing. To make it very clear, it is about saving lives and you are doing a fantastic job.

You mentioned the HIS scheme and the other grant schemes. From feedback coming to my office, I hear a lot of people felt they ended too early. Can you go through those schemes and why they ended so early?

**Mr GUNNER:** We had a big decision to make about the HIS because it was oversubscribed. We sat as a Cabinet and looked at it and thought there were probably three ways to go—we stick to the original decision, which was getting \$30m out over six months and saying yes to the first 5000. On Thursday around 4000 people had applied, over and above the 5000. Do you allow those in?

To me, they were difficult decisions to make because we had not had any chance to provide notice of the scheme essentially hitting its mark or closing. We allowed one more day. We thought 24 hours' notice was reasonable to expand the scheme for one more day. If we also then expanded, based on how many people would be interested in 12 months of work—obviously, between announcing the scheme and getting to that point in time, we had greater clarity about the impact rippling into the Wet Season. So, we said one more day, but 12 months instead of six months. No one estimated that we would have more applications on the Friday than the previous nine or 10 days combined. So, we expand that scheme.

The lesson we learned from that, as we came to the Business Improvement Grants and the Immediate Work Grants, was that DTBI put a ticker up on the main page so you could see how many people had applied and where the count was so fairly, people knew we would close it off when we hit that mark. If we wanted to, we could make an informed decision later if there was enough cash flowing through the economy. Or if we still need to keep cash flowing at an appropriate time, we can make an informed decision about where the money is going, where it is hitting and which trades are getting the benefits.

I thought that was the right way to manage those. I thank the 19 500 Territorians who put their hand up for the HIS as well as the businesses and community groups. That is how we came to the decision to handle those grant schemes.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** What consultation was undertaken with tradies when you made the decision not to close the scheme but to fundamentally change the rules of the game? Tradies were issuing quotes for three months' time expecting to complete the work in that first three months and now you have pushed the time frame out for approvals over six months for work to be completed in 12. What consultation was done about the negative impact to business with the change of that rule?

**Mr GUNNER:** The time frame was always for work over the six months and then we changed it to 12 months. I think there is a fundamental misunderstanding about how the scheme worked.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Okay. Who did you consult with when changing it from six to 12?

**Mr GUNNER:** I have not had a single complaint from a tradie about getting 19 500 people—we went from 5000 to 19 500, so that is 15 000 complaints. I have talked to a lot of businesses and I have never had the complaint that we gave them too much work.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You have never had a tradie expressing concern ...

**Mr GUNNER:** I have never had a tradie say to me, Chief Minister, why did you go from 5000 jobs to 19 500 jobs. Why did you give 12 months' worth of work instead of six months?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I am sure you did not. I am asking you an entirely different question.

**Mr GUNNER:** That is the question you asked is why did you go from six months to 12 months and allow 15 000 extra works.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I can restate the question if you are confused.

**Mr GUNNER:** I think it is very clear you were saying that we should not have extended to 15 000 additional people. I disagree with the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Did you consult with any businesses or even industry leaders around what impact it might have by changing the length of time on the scheme?

**Mr GUNNER:** They all said ‘thank you for creating more jobs and more work’.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Did any of them raise any concern with you about the fact their quotes might not be time-valid because of pushing out the scheme?

**Mr GUNNER:** This is the third time we have done the scheme and the quotes are working the same as they always have.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** If it is the third time you have done the scheme why were you not measuring the amount of applications and the amount attributed to that so that you could measure in advance how fast the scheme was running out and therefore give appropriate notice to Territorians about how much was left?

**Mr GUNNER:** It is because we were measuring the scheme that we made the decision about the 24 hours’ notice.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** You just said earlier it was over-subscribed and that is why you gave people 24 hours.

**Mr GUNNER:** I just answered that. We knew it was over-subscribed because we were monitoring it.

**Madam CHAIR:** I think that question has been answered. I did not say it up front, but we do have two chairs there. Chief Minister, if you would like to bring up a CEO to answer any questions at any time.

Do you have a different question, Member for Spillett?

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I have questions on the Home Improvement Scheme.

**Madam CHAIR:** I will allow one more question with the Member for Spillett on the Home Improvement Scheme.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Why do I only get one more question?

**Mr WOOD:** Mine was the about the help to the businesses that the Chief Minister mentioned in his opening statement.

**Madam CHAIR:** We will come to you in just one moment. The Member for Blain is also waiting.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** The Treasurer has been stating in the media that agencies have been asked to identify savings to pay for the Home Improvement Scheme—that you guys do not know where the money is coming from. Has that been consolidated? Do you know which agencies are paying for the Home Improvement Scheme?

**Mr GUNNER:** We are doing the work to find the extra money from within; I think that is quite responsible. We know there are places we can go to. We are making final decisions and still doing a bit of work on that to lock it all in. We know that we can do it from within.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** You have not got that information back from agencies about savings?

**Mr GUNNER:** We have absolute comfort that we can find the money. We are doing the final touches to the work.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Why, prior to this meeting, were Treasury actuals not provided in order to be open and transparent ...

**Madam CHAIR:** We went from HIS to something else.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** It is on the opening statement.

**Madam CHAIR:** You can come back to that later.

Member for Blain.

**Mr MILLS:** Mine is a supplementary and I let it go. I accept your answer that we do not know what the books will look like because we do not have the federal budget in place. Surely in conversations you had at the federal meetings and also in any consultation with the Treasurer here, you would not be expecting our own-source revenue to remain the same. Many businesses will not be able to survive this. Have there been any calculations on our own-source revenue changes for the Northern Territory and has there been any discussion on the GST pool, which is 70% of our revenue? What changes we can predict for that?

**Mr GUNNER:** It is 50%. I hate to throw a public servant under the bus, in some respects, but no one can give us accurate information on that yet. If you go back six weeks, the forecast from Treasury—and I apologise I said it was wrong. In Treasury speak it is ‘revised’—that is how Under Treasurers say ‘wrong’. While we are in the middle of a global pandemic, we cannot get accurate advice. That is a reason the Australian Treasurer moved the budget to October, so there is the ability to make the right decisions.

We asked National Cabinet for some kind of insight to what the GST pool may be. We requested it but do not have that insight yet. The federal Treasurer would find it hard to get that accurate data yet. In a matter of weeks or months we will get a clear view, which is why they chose October for the budget. That is the time frame that they indicated to work to get the accurate data.

For me, it simply goes to the fact that while in the middle of a global pandemic, the Territory economy does not stand isolated from the country, or from the world. While we are safe, others are not. That gives us a great inability to predict what things will be. As you know, the GST pool is largely dictated more by Sydney than Darwin. Unfortunately, while we are going okay—to be fair, Sydney is trending towards being safe but they are not where we are at. I wish I could give you a better answer than that.

**Mr MILLS:** No, that is okay. I was just wondering if there are calculations and consideration of that. That is the sort of information that Territorians are now looking for so that we know where we are headed and that they can elect a government to manage something known rather than a round of applause for how well we have done so far.

**Mr GUNNER:** There has been much consideration; that would be a fair point.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I have a supplementary question.

**Madam CHAIR:** No, I am moving on to the Member for Nelson.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** I just have a supplementary question to the Member for Blain’s question.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Spillett, you have had plenty of questions. I have the latitude to prioritise questions for members of the PAC of which you are not. If the Member for Daly would like to give up his seat formally, for you, then that is a different matter. I am moving to the Member for Nelson; I am ruling on it and that is it.

**Mr WOOD:** Chief Minister, you mentioned the help for businesses in your opening speech, but on 16 April you announced, according to the *NT News* that:

*Chief Minister announces \$20 million JobKeeper gap-filling plan to help casuals ...*

It goes on to say:

*The latest stage of the survival fund, which is expected to save 10,000 Territory jobs, effectively ‘plugs gaps’ in the Federal Government’s \$130b JobKeeper payment package.*

I have seen businesses who do not fit into the government’s JobKeeper plan because they have casuals who worked there for less than 12 months. You announced that there will be \$20m for that. I cannot find anything, even in the latest paper about the small business survival package, that says small businesses can apply for funds to help those people. In one case, they lost eight casuals; they went straight to being unemployed. Where can they find how to apply for some of that \$20m?

**Mr GUNNER:** I am very happy to explain this. It is because we simplified the application process to an extent that people could not find it. We are working with businesses on this. If you applied and were eligible for the first stage of the Small Business Survival Fund, you are automatically eligible for the second stage. You only have to do the paperwork once. People went looking for that \$20m not realising that you apply for the first lot and automatically qualify across. The qualification details are the same.

If you are a business in hardship and meet the criteria, you qualify for both schemes meaning one set of paperwork. We simplified it down to one application form and in that second stage, you can use all casuals, visa holders and others to calculate the amount of assistance you can receive from the government. The JobKeeper does not allow you to do that. For example, I spoke to businesses that worked that out and they were able to re-employ staff they had to let go because of the way we allow them to calculate schemes.

The application form is the first one for the first scheme and you automatically qualify for the second stage as a result of that.

**Mr WOOD:** Is there a phone number this person can ring to find that out?

**Mr GUNNER:** I will ask ...

**Madam CHAIR:** Perhaps we can supply that offline after—if that could be done.

**Mr WOOD:** Because this person has been waiting two weeks.

**Mr GUNNER:** 1800 193 111.

**Mr WOOD:** Thank you.

**Mr GUNNER:** We simplified it down to make it—we thought. If you make something too simple, it becomes too hard.

**Madam CHAIR:** Territory Controller, I think that we have made you wait long enough. Could we please now invite you to make a very brief opening statement?

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Madam Chair, should you not wait until questions on the opening statement have been exhausted?

**Madam CHAIR:** No. There are a number of headings here and I am sure that your questions can sit within that.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I think it is important to set the context of where we started with COVID-19 as it relates to the Northern Territory. It was prior to the formation of our public health declarations. It was actually providing response and repatriation for those who were caught in Wuhan as evacuees and then more broadly for the Diamond Jubilee from Japan.

We had the Howard Springs facility set up, which was a joint approach through NT Health and our ADF colleagues, as well as coordination out of the emergency operation centre that we set up specifically for that purpose.

Obviously as COVID-19 started to spread more dramatically across the world and the images were coming into Australia, there was a higher focus on the preparedness posture for the Northern Territory. From an emergency perspective we were starting to move into that space. There were a number of TEMC meetings called to consider that, which ultimately lead to the formalised establishment of the EOC process and the emergency operation centre and the transition of the control authority to Police, Fire and Emergency Services following the formal declaration of the Chief Health Officer under the *Public and Environmental Health Act*.

That public emergency declaration very much crystallised that we were in emergency response and that was contingent on that fact within Australia, under our pandemic plan, a positive test indicated that was trigger point, which linked into the broader conversations that were occurring at the National Cabinet.

Pretty well from that point in time we have been in 24/7 response phase and that has been the position across the Northern Territory. The numbers to date are nothing short of exceptional in respect of how we were able to manage to roll out to secure our borders. I think it is fair to say, for the awareness of everyone on this committee, that almost on a 24-hour basis there was not incremental change, but dramatic change from each

posture and that was also the case across the country. Through all of those we were well-prepared, well-instepped, if not at the forefront of moving to a position to provide greater security and certainty to Territorians.

The modelling we adopted was followed by a number of other jurisdictions as it related to our border controls, particularly our road border controls. We moved very quickly to set up border control checkpoints across the whole of the Northern Territory. I have had the fortune to visit my people as well as the Australian Federal Police and Australian Defence Force personnel who are out there 24/7 providing further protection to the Territory. They are all doing it with a great level of commitment and passion and knowing they are placing service above self.

The health response as the hazard authority is also to be commended. They have been working in with the emergency operation centre providing sound advice in collaboration with the Chief Health Officer and the Attorney-General's department through the Solicitor for the Northern Territory. We needed to ensure we were not impinging on the Constitution of Australia and that every act and step could be sustained under legislation and stand any rigour against it. At every point we considered the lot of Territorians and ensured that wherever possible we were conscious of not diminishing civil liberties to any great extent. All the directions are made legally under the *Public and Environmental Health Act* by the CHO and as each step moved into position, we have been able to effectively communicate that.

Territorians should be justifiably proud of the collaboration from the community. With 6500-odd compliance checks and only 42 infringements issued over that period—the bulk of those infringements were more for failing to adhere to physical distancing—it is an absolute credit to how the Territory adapted to this and the fact we did it with an 'education first' approach.

It was an extremely dynamic and ever-changing situation. For the record Chief, you have not been updated on this because it occurred just before I walked in here. Because of our practice that has been in place for people returning from international locations, the four ADF officers will be collected and go directly to RDH for more appropriate physical and health assessments and, if need be, transitioned to the Howard Springs facility. The five non-tested people will follow the normal directions that relate to international arrivals and go into supervised quarantine for 14 days. That has all been coordinated ...

**Mr GUNNER:** I answered in a conversation with the Defence minister, federally. It shows you how the information flow is working rapidly.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** The criticality of that basis is about ensuring Robertson Barracks is not impacted by COVID-19 if we can take appropriate mitigation steps. To the credit of the Northern Territory, particularly Health and all those involved, the ability with which we have been able to manage arrivals into the Territory and those who tested positive has realised an ability for that to be contained. We have had no further additional spread as a result. We are in a great position. That is because of the collaboration across the board and the focus of our emergency response, which has arguably been one of the most sustained responses to an emergency ever in the Northern Territory.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you, Territory Controller. I will ask if there are any questions on the opening statement. Member for Daly?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Commissioner, are we being charged for the federal police and the involvement of the Army in securing the borders as well as the other things they are doing, or is that coming gratis from the feds as part of the national response?

**Mr GUNNER:** I thank the Prime Minister. We had some very early conversations about the Territory's remote circumstances. He has been extremely cooperative and essentially created some bespoke agreements with the Northern Territory on a number of matters, one being the Australian Defence Force. Obviously, the Australian Government is picking up the bill for Australian Defence Force personnel and Australian Federal Police.

It is important to acknowledge this is not just ordinary arrangements. Because of our circumstances and distances involved et cetera, we have been able to negotiate a bespoke arrangement with the Australian Government. Commissioner.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** That is correct. AFP and ADF are funding their contribution to the Northern Territory. That is also the case for the Australian Border Force personnel who have been providing support for us at our ports and airports where they are based. The collaboration and the multiagency approach across the Northern Territory Government, local governments and with the federal government and the relevant

agencies, has been a testament to how effective and well-coordinated we have been in the commitment to help one another out.

**Mr HIGGINS:** I suppose those costs are also covering things like temporary accommodation in some of the isolated spots. Presumably, those costs are being split, or is that another cost we might be picking up?

**Mr GUNNER:** I will let the Commissioner answer that direct.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** In respect to the fixed accommodation where we have Northern Territory-based personnel—which is every one of those—we are facilitating the provision of semi-permanent infrastructure at those sites. The reality is those sites will be in place if we need a drawdown of resources or there is a broader request for ADF personnel to return to alternate duties—or the AFP officers for that matter. Northern Territory-based police will still be enforcing border security in place under our direction.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Okay.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Arafura, do you have any questions on the opening statement?

**Mr COSTA:** No, I do not.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Blain?

**Mr MILLS:** No, thank you.

**Mr WOOD:** Commissioner in relation to costs, INPEX village has been used originally under the control of the Commonwealth, I suppose? I should say now that I thank you for the work you and other people did—without going through them all—in dealing with the initial groups of people from Wuhan and the Diamond Princess—I should not get my princesses mixed up; I wish the other princess had been held—as well as what happened in the Northern Territory.

Now that it has been operating as a pandemic clinic, a place for people with Coronavirus and a place for people who have not behaved themselves properly, who is paying for the INPEX village at the present time?

**Mr GUNNER:** I will ask the Minister for Health and the CEO for Health to come forward. They are better prepared to answer this one. I will pass directly to the Minister for Health and she will coordinate the answer with the CEO.

**Ms FYLES:** Thank you, Member for Nelson, I appreciate your comments. Many people worked literally around the clock to get the Howard Springs facility set up. We acknowledge that the community was very anxious when that facility was first considered to host the evacuees from Wuhan and then the cruise ship. It is important for Territorians to note that the experiences we learned there from a health perspective, really helped our clinicians and our overall response to the Coronavirus here in the Northern Territory.

We made sure the federal Health Minister paid those costs. On the visit back from the facility with him and Brendan Murphy, he was very excited about the facility and that we could host those people. I said he would be paying for that. I literally had him over a barrel.

Since the federal government has handed the facility back to us, we set up the drive-through pandemic clinic. I know you have visited that site, as has the Leader of the Opposition. The cost has come within the Northern Territory Department of Health budget. In some cases, it is shifting resources we already out to that site. I will ask Catherine Stoddart, Chief Executive, to provide you with the specific figures.

**Professor STODDART:** Catherine Stoddart, CEO Health. The specific figures regarding the funding for Howard Springs that we are accruing relate to the operating costs, which are \$793 000 to date. There were some establishment costs, which were \$641 000.

During that time, we have been able to keep beyond the initial Wuhan and the Diamond Princess responses. We have 30 beds available as a red zone for COVID-19 patients and 100 beds available for quarantine, should we need it. We can expand that should we require it, though at this stage we have not needed it.

**Mr SIEVERS:** We heard about quarantining in different places. How do you ensure that home quarantine is being done properly? We have heard cases around Australia where they have caught people doing all sorts of things. Can you go through how we are doing those checks and balances?

**Commissioner CHALKER:** Our very early focus, particularly on those who were in isolation at home, was to enhance our compliance checks. We teamed up with public environmental health officers with authorised officers via police, or with an ADF person, simply in an observation role—to assist with the numbers and mobility—driving around while the environmental health officer took notes. That collaboration was well received.

We got on the front foot and articulated that we were going to get out and start engaging with people and checking on them. It was not simply from a compliance perspective; it was also to ensure there was a health check during the 14 days. We had some early spots of non-compliance and managed to mitigate them relatively quickly. My recall of that first week was that we had less than six or seven. We then reached a point of nearly 6500 compliance checks over the period and only 42 infringement notices. I recall that about less than 28 of those were issued for non-compliance.

Our early challenge was being able to ascertain those who chose to flagrantly breach their self-isolation and leave their home, then to have a broader health assessment as to that individual's circumstances. A large proportion of those were able to be satisfied that they were not categorised as high risk and no further contact tracing was required. Our subsequent review of all of those has held that in good stead.

**Mr SIEVERS:** Are the checks staggered so they do not know what time you are coming?

**Commissioner CHALKER:** There was not a lot of intent to forecast what we were doing. Clearly, the approach we adopted managed to find a number of people blatantly not adhering to the isolation process. That then informed our further decision-making about moving into a more refined supervised environment, ensuring that our compliance flatlined.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Commissioner, thank you very much for everything the police have done to keep Territorians safe and continue to do so. I think everyone would assume that the police budget has probably gone out the window during this crisis and so it should. My question is about how your agency has been supported budget-wise, because I can only imagine you have had to mobilise a number of different tactics and more resources than you ordinarily would.

How is that working for you? Are you having to avail your agency of Treasurer's advances, or is money flowing from other agencies? If you could explain how that process is working so that you guys can have the response you need without being held up?

**Mr GUNNER:** The Commissioner can definitely talk about that from a police point of view. Obviously, the work Treasury is doing—not being aware of where the answer goes, but we might get Treasury up to talk to the rest of it.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** Yes. We have been pretty well focused on what we can try to do within our normal remit. Obviously, overtime is something we have had to oblige, given the speed with which we had to mobilise. Certainly, the addition of 102 Australian Federal Police officers and the support from the ADF, from a logistics and planning perspective, significantly reduced that burden on our budget.

We had to do an assessment on a number of things, including our personnel levels and service levels, particularly if the pandemic truly gripped the Northern Territory. There is a significant focus on our planning and preparedness around having pretty well 80% availability, 60% and right down to 40%. That was leading the country. We had very positive feedback from the Police Federation of Australia, our own association, about the speed with which we moved to that, to understand it.

We also needed contingencies in place. If our pilot cadre was impacted and we lost a number of them, we would need sufficient platform. We have also put 23 additional checkpoints across some of the most isolated locations in the Territory, so we picked up an additional platform via an arrangement on a lease basis, so that we have further air capacity to quickly mobilise to any of our people who need assistance.

We are conscious of the fact, particularly on our major highways, we have our officers standing at locations that are 130 kilometre per hour speed zones. You would be critically aware of the tragedy in Victoria last week. Very early on in our planning, we made sure there was appropriate signage in place and then, of course, finding appropriate accommodation or moving accommodation to our people, given the distance they are from other infrastructure and services.



All of those costs, at this point in time, we have managed to compile from within. We utilise Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics for a lot of support in that regard and to assist us in the procurement pathway as it relates to that. In reality, our overtime has probably been the bigger burden at this point in time.

We still have a significant period of consolidation to determine exactly what those figures look like, but on current trend, we are thinking we are probably at about \$1m per month over budget. That has pretty much been based on the last two months and the forecast of our committed expenditure into the next month on current balance.

**Madam CHAIR:** We might head back to our agenda for item three. It is good that we have the Minister for Health and the CEO of Department of Health. I still invite questions on these areas through the Chief Minister. The first area we have on our agenda is in the area of Health on effectiveness of controls and treatment.

Do any committee members have questions on the area of Health? You can then prioritise them.

Member for Arafura, do you have any questions immediately on Health?

**Mr COSTA:** Not at this stage, Madam Chair.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Daly?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Not at this stage.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Blain?

**Mr MILLS:** Yes. I have questions about the de-escalation of physical distancing, as it relates to fireworks. I need to understand—it is to the Chief Minister, I assume—your rationale for the decision about self-government day.

**Mr GUNNER:** We were thinking about it in terms of creating a mass-gathering event, pressure on the public health service, et cetera, and were surprised—pleasantly surprised in many ways—by the fact a significant number of the people who sell fireworks every year contacted our office and said, 'Please, not this year. We would normally order them. The day we made the decision is normally when the order forms go in. We normally order them about now and get them from China, around Wuhan. We do not think that this year is the right year to do it. We are worried about doing anything this year to put pressure on the public health system, fires, police, ambulance or hospitals. We would rather take a year off. You need to tell us now for certainty because now is when we do the ordering.'

I appreciate that contact. I thank the businesses that reached out to us, because the order time frame is earlier than I realised. I thought I had more time to consider it. Off the back of the businesses contacting us, we contacted a few others in the area. For us, it is about respecting where they are coming from and that this year's Territory Day will be different.

I have heard you say before, Member for Blain, that Territory Day is more than cracker day. This year's Territory Day will be purely Territory Day. Someone said that we cancelled it; we did not cancel it, just the public and private use of fireworks. The challenge this year is to be the best Territorian you can be and to find a way to celebrate that does not involve fireworks. Next year, we will have fireworks on Territory Day.

**Mr MILLS:** Were those who spoke to you retailers or wholesalers?

**Mr GUNNER:** Both.

**Mr MILLS:** How many wholesalers came to speak with you?

**Mr GUNNER:** I can get that detail for you, but a number of businesses contacted our office.

**Mr MILLS:** How many of them told you that the fireworks came from Wuhan?

**Mr GUNNER:** All of them. Sorry, to be clear, it is around Wuhan or from China, not necessarily inside the heart of Wuhan.

**Mr MILLS:** Your public statement said that they come from Wuhan, which is the problem. That is one of the further explanations.

**Mr GUNNER:** Whenever I spoke about it, I have said 'around Wuhan'.

**Mr MILLS:** Most of the said that they get them from Wuhan?

**Mr GUNNER:** From around Wuhan, yes. From China. That is my understanding.

**Mr MILLS:** How does COVID-19 travel on fireworks to Darwin, if they come from Wuhan?

**Mr GUNNER:** It is interesting that they come from China and near Wuhan, but I think when they have to do the ordering and the pressure on the public health system are the main reasons.

**Mr MILLS:** You are on the record as saying that the real reason was people had to order them. What happens if they are already here?

**Mr GUNNER:** We made a decision that applies to all businesses; I will not pick favourites amongst who may or may not have already ordered fire crackers.

**Mrs FINOCHIARRO:** Chief Minister, today you outlined your roadmap, which eases restrictions over a period of time, all of which comes to an end well before Territory Day. Will your government go ahead at a minimum with public firework displays?

**Mr GUNNER:** No.

**Mrs FINOCHIARRO:** Why is that?

**Mr GUNNER:** We will celebrate Territory Day differently this year. We made that decision and will not spend money on public fireworks or encourage mass gatherings. We will still say that anyone planning mass gatherings will be considered on a case-by-case negotiated basis. There is no guarantee that you will be able to have a mass gathering. You must work with the Chief Health Officer. We will not go down that path and will lead by example.

**Mr SIEVERS:** Is there an update on how many cases have recovered and how do we define that? Is there a final test we do?

**Mr GUNNER:** Before I pass to the Minister for Health and the CEO, I will say a thank you to Natasha, Katherine, Hugh and many others. Their clinical advice is first-class in the Northern Territory and their response has been amazing. There was significant leadership across the nation from the Territory and I want to put that firmly on the record.

**Ms FYLES:** The Coronavirus is like no other health emergency we have seen in the world. There are over three million diagnosed cases and we estimate that it is well beyond that for undiagnosed cases. We have seen the tragic consequences. Territorians have bought the Department of Health and health practitioners time. We have seen 28 Territorians diagnosed in the NT. Of that, 25 have recovered.

You raised an important question and I will ask the Chief Health Officer if he could join us at the table to provide the clinical definition of 'recovered' and how we get to that point. It is something that the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee has spent much time discussing and working through. I will ask Hugh to speak about that definition and those principals.

**Mr SIEVERS:** That is definitely something that has come to my office. People are asking how we get to that point and clear someone completely.

**Dr HEGGIE:** This is complex. I make the point that the virus is in control—there is no doubt about that—it is unpredictable and it is very infectious.

On the definition of 'recovery', broadly the trajectory of the illness that we now know—it is important to understand that we are talking about the evidence we know at the moment, not the issues we thought we might know early on. We did not know how it was transmitted, how infectious it was and the cohorts of people who would be impacted. That has become very clear, particularly from recent data and evidence.

Generally speaking, you become symptomatic within several days of exposure, but the symptoms can be as mild as loss of smell or a blocked nose. We saw that in an aged-care facility in New South Wales where a single person, who did not feel particularly unwell, contributed to 11 deaths.

The illness proceeds and generally it is a mild disease with minimum symptoms. In children, we believe it does not occur often and, in fact, may be undiagnosed. In the Northern Territory we have no evidence of that occurring.

At the 14-day period—and this is the expert panel—the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee took a precautionary approach to call 14 days, but probably the illness actually goes, in terms of infectivity—that is probably the most important thing—somewhere around 10 days.

The testing I will get to, but some people have continuing symptoms for some time. They may get a secondary bacterial infection in their lungs. Also, in this virus, something happens to some people—and perhaps the Prime Minister of the UK—where the body starts an autoimmune process that continues to damage the body, irrespective of the virus. Some of those people end up with very severe lung disease. They may need oxygen or ventilator support.

It also affects other organs such as the kidneys. Many of these people end up on dialysis and they also have liver failure. When you reach that stage, there is no treatment that we know of. You might have heard recently it referred to as Kawasaki disease. This is now the understanding of where the risk is.

There will come a point when you either improve, maybe with some residual symptoms with a persistent cough, but not infective; or have some further disease that you might recover from; or you might not recover at all. In fact, it reaches a point where the person has been in hospital for a protracted period of time and there is no option except to have an end-of-life discussion.

The testing is an important question because there can be persistent positive tests that you use different platforms for. You use a range of platforms, some very sensitive and some less sensitive. Some only become positive after the first couple of days of the illness. There is a period where it might not be positive, but some people continue to test positive then become negative. You test again and they become positive.

We have had people who have been isolated in hospital for around 25 days in the Northern Territory. They have not been unwell. They have been isolated, but not unwell. At least maybe not physically unwell, but mentally. That is really challenging because we did not know whether they would be infectious to others, but precautions were put in place.

It would seem that there will be a new definition of recovery that relates to the symptom recovery, where you might have residual problems but are no longer infectious. Have I explained that well enough?

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you very much, it is interesting.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Can I ask a supplementary to that question?

**Madam CHAIR:** Regarding that particular question?

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Yes.

**Madam CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** I do not know if I can ask you directly, or to ask the Chief.

**Madam CHAIR:** Ask through the Chief.

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** Chief, you have been saying that when we have zero cases then the clock starts on 28 days. I just wanted to get an understanding of where that comes from and then will there be, or is there, sentinel testing in the Territory?

**Mr GUNNER:** I will answer that initially and then pass to Dr Heggie. The World Health Organisation says that 'eradicated' is classed as 28 days after the last cured case. When we last discussed this at National Cabinet last Friday the AHPPC had not decided on an Australian definition of 'eradicated' yet. I am not sure if they have yet. I have been using the WHO determination. I am happy to pass to Hugh and see if there has been a change in answer or if the AHPPC is agreeing with the WHO.

**Dr HEGGIE:** The AHPPC meets daily and has considered a range of issues and, most recently, this one. It has not gone to National Cabinet yet, because we are looking at something that is evolving and the

knowledge is evolving. But knowledge and evidence are very useful because it allows us to understand when we can start adjusting the controls.

For me, to have no locally acquired cases, no outbreaks defined at more than three and no community transmissions, I am proud to say that our team and our system has allowed that to happen. The important thing is that we must continue to monitor through the adjustments. As we allow people to do things more freely, we have to be testing and monitoring. Our border control is probably one of the strongest controls that we have and our biggest vulnerability.

I would like to think that while we do this and become clear of COVID-19, we can move to another adjustment that allows people to live a degree of normality or 'the new norm', but the controls might need to be levered back from about 2.5 down to a four. That four might be in a specific community or even a suburb. But we have to do that and that is why I promote the principles that all of us have to adhere to and promote and practice.

**Ms FYLES:** We have had testing available in Darwin through the whole Coronavirus. We have a testing machine in Central Australia located in Alice Springs. These testing machines use slightly different reagent, which is the testing activation. The one in Alice Springs—we have been quite open—has about 30 reagents available.

Remember that most people will have a mild to moderate illness. It is not something that you start to feel ill now and by tonight you are severely ill, it builds over time. Through the work the Minister for Infrastructure has done with the Chief Minister, we secured the air routes into the Territory and within the Territory so people get tested. The tests come to Darwin, but we have the ability for emergency testing, so to speak, in Central Australia if we need it.

We have been working with the federal government, which has announced 83 point-of-care testing. A point-of-care is a different way of testing, but it will give you a test result in about an hour. There will be 83 rolled out around Australia, predominantly in Aboriginal communities. We are working with the federal government and the Aboriginal medical organisations on the best locations for those. As a rule of thumb, we would like them within three hours of a community but we all know that practicalities of that in the Northern Territory.

Point-of-care testing will be rolled in communities. People can be essentially kept at the clinic, tested—you just have the common cold—and away you go. Or, 'No, we have a case of Coronavirus and can act more quickly'.

It is also important that we do not just hog all 83 for the Northern Territory. What happens in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland has an impact on us. That is your point-of-care testing, then we also have the sentinel testing.

We are on top of this, but we will test cohorts and this is done in different ways clinically. I could perhaps hand back to Hugh to explain sentinel testing because this is really important. We cannot become complacent from a health perspective. The reason we can announce the measures today is that the Chief Minister announced that we have prepared our health system. Our ICU systems, primary health and public health responses are ready and sentinel testing is a key part of that.

**Dr HEGGIE:** In surveillance, we use a range of approaches. You can test within an outbreak to see how far it occurred but also there are times where you can test for mild systems, which is sentinel testing. Because we must preserve the resources of the test materials and not overload our laboratory system. That is where you must test certain cohorts.

We have come to understand that casual encounters at a birthday party or lunch can lead to, in health practitioners, transmission within a hospital but also the business continuity of the health system can be severely compromised, given we have a limited number of practitioners here. We are testing them as well as residential aged care workers—an incredible vulnerability—to ensure the disease does not transmit there.

We have the ability to test for emergency situations and community testing where we can have visibility of any outbreaks or community transmission when we do not know where it came from.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Our sentinel testing is more of that cohort testing as opposed to random people in the community who are even asymptomatic?

**Dr HEGGIE:** It was agreed by AHPPC and supported by the Communicable Diseases Network that broad-based testing across a whole population has a number of issues. It is like looking for a needle in a haystack. The community would have to agree to testing where the risk of finding a case is very low. You can consume laboratory functions by doing that; whereas, targeted testing is much more effective. Importantly, people with minimal symptoms would be encouraged to be tested.

**Ms FYLES:** Where we know there has been community transmission. A good example is the eastern suburbs of Sydney, in the Bondi region. We knew there were multiple cases there. Because the illness is so mild, people do not think—for example, someone thought they were just hungover. That is where you start to do broader testing and test people who feel asymptomatic but have a mild symptom.

These are the directions we followed for testing. We offer testing at various locations across the Territory. There is the federally-funded respiratory clinic at the Palmerston GP SuperClinic, Danila Dilba and one in Central Australia. These respiratory clinics are designed to have the appropriate PPE and people have to book in. My GP might decide that, if they are busy and I have respiratory symptoms, it is better to go there because it puts less pressure on them as a GP. We have a thorough range of testing processes and have been working strongly with the federal Minister for Health and Minister for Indigenous Australians on these resources to protect our vulnerable population.

**Mr WOOD:** In regard to people who have been given an exemption to quarantine at home, what is the schedule for ensuring they are checked? I know a number of people asked for exemptions and the Chief Health Officer would have received their requests. What happens in their case?

**Mr GUNNER:** That will be answered between the Commissioner of Police and the CEO of Health.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** Within the emergency operations centre, we have Health. The Deputy Chief Health Officer, Di Stevens, who has been enormous through this period, has often been in there guiding the interplay with the environmental health officers and the compliance team. The environmental health officers have access to the personal information and relevant medical advice of those people. They then prepare a roster for the compliance teams to head out. The response element is coordinated from that perspective.

We had a fairly heavy focus on trying to make sure there was very high visibility engagement and at various peaks there were upwards of 250-plus compliance checks per day. We were guided by the environmental health officers as to how that was undertaken and the basis of having broader consideration of it not just being a compliance check but also a health and wellbeing check.

**Professor STODDART:** From a health perspective, the exemptions process is quite robust. It is managed by the Chief Health Officer, Di Stephens, and the pandemic cell. We provide exemptions for specific reasons including mental health as a key area and for other significant health issues. That is determined on a case-by-case basis.

The volumes have been significant with applications around the 5000 mark and we use a case management approach, so it is quite rigorous.

**Mr WOOD:** You would have received emails from me occasionally about people who have exemptions to stay in the rural area. Are there checks on people in the rural area?

**Professor STODDART:** That process of checks is coordinated through police. We try, where possible in the first instance, to provide a proportionate response; however, as we have seen, people have been fined because they have not complied and continued not to comply. There is a very strong relationship between the environmental health officers, compliance officers and police in delivering that.

**Commissioner CHALKER:** What is also important to highlight is the level of compliance for many has been superb. A lot of people—and we saw this in a number of circumstances—went to such significant steps to prepare for recovering in their own home where they ensured zero contact with anybody, deliveries were being made with zero contact and even to the point where any testing was done with zero contact.

It turns to how significant the public information was, particularly as we made it as Territory-centric as we could. We were very conscious that across the nation there was a whole lot of mixed messaging coming out. We had to try to make sure that we could break through that, particularly for those returning to the Territory.

We provided people with information sheets to let them know what would be expected of them as they went into the 14 days and help them stay compliant. The information was deeply considered but adaptable to their

circumstances. I reaffirm that the largest portion of the Territory—we were at 99% compliance. That is an incredible number.

**Mr WOOD:** The people I know who asked for exemptions were all prepared to do everything that they were required to do.

**Ms FYLES:** As the Chief Executive said, we received over 5000 requests for exemptions. We have been processing them as efficiently as we can but we need to give them due process. We acknowledge that there have been cases where people have been incredibly frustrated but we need to remember that this is about protecting the broader Territory community. We ask those people to ring the hotline.

There are some people who are putting in for a medical exemption. I was dealing with the other day. We are trying to deal with them in a date order. It is not that they are any less important or their reason is not valid, it is purely about processing. We acknowledge that and apologise to people. This process of quarantining is to protect the community from Coronavirus.

**Mr WOOD:** Obviously, some people would be happy to find out that some sports are now freely available. In relation to what the Chief Minister has announced today and I quote:

*Attend an arena, stadium, sporting facility including community and sporting competitions with spectators and approved seating configuration.*

My concern is that many of the sporting facilities I get around to will not have a grandstand. How do we work on controlling spectators in an area where you cannot have a seating configuration?

**Mr GUNNER:** The principle of 1.5 metres remains the same. It is probably easier to explain or demonstrate with a grandstand, but I also think it is possible for a sport to work it out how to manage that around the grounds.

This is obviously being done after considerable discussion with our clinical officers. I am not sure if it is best for Catherine or Hugh to talk about how they got there and how they ...

**Professor STODDART:** I will start, then I am sure Hugh can finish. We used a range of principles in getting to each of the three stages. The first one was, obviously, about outdoors, which is much easier based on the principles to enact and has the lowest risk. As we move through each stage, there is more complexity in how we manage it and the compliance and requirements of a COVID-19 plan that will be needed.

If we were to take an outdoor arena, for example, we would work with that group to ensure we have a COVID plan that meets our requirement. It may be that in the case of seating that we have a checkerboard arrangement so there is 1.5 metres between people ...

**Mr WOOD:** But that is for over 500, is it not? I am talking about under 500.

**Professor STODDART:** But even ...

**Mr GUNNER:** No, the principle applies. In some respects, it might be easier to forget the 500 here. It is more that if you are going over 500 you might have to negotiate. But the principle drives the outcome. I suggest it is more the ingress and egress that may be more important to manage than potentially how you seat around the ground. People will be able to work it out. Probably crushing through a gate is more of a concern than how you ...

**Mr WOOD:** Or where the shade is at 10 o'clock in the morning.

**Madam CHAIR:** True.

**Mr SIEVERS:** Or bring your own.

**Mr WOOD:** The basic principles still have to apply, but have you ever given consideration—I know the Prime Minister has said much about the app. I heard people in the Territory say why bother with the app because we do not have any communicable issues with the virus. Do you think it would be possible, with some sporting fixtures, that you may have to turn up with a phone that has the app on it—so the only way into that sporting facility would be if you have the app on ...

**Mr GUNNER:** I can answer that.

**Mr WOOD:** Would you think that would be a reasonable idea?

**Mr GUNNER:** I hope I can talk to this because it was discussed at the National Cabinet—the idea of the app essentially being a passport. It was decided eventually at the national level that we do not want to load too many things into the app. We want to keep it as simple as possible. It is just there for the contact tracing. The significant privacy issues have been dealt with. It is accessed by health officials with permission from the individual. Even if you download the app you still have to give permission for access if you happen to have coronavirus et cetera.

But the passport thing was discussed. There probably would have been issues if we had done that with legislation through the Australian Government or a local level with the *Anti-Discrimination Act*. Do you think it is something that we thought was worth discussion—the idea of the tracing app being, essentially, a passport—you are doing the right thing, you get rewarded ...

**Mr WOOD:** Your ticket for getting in.

**Mr GUNNER:** But—I think you will support me here—that is not permission to break the 1.5-metre rule or the principles. It just says that you are doing the right thing. I encourage everyone to download it. It is crucial help. The app makes what Health does quicker.

**Mr WOOD:** If something went wrong and there was an outbreak at that sporting facility, you would have quick contact with who was there?

**Mr GUNNER:** Absolutely. It will be very helpful if everyone downloaded it. The sport might choose to go down that path but it would not be something—at the National Cabinet we discussed not enforcing that or not going down that path.

**Ms FYLES:** With the staged approach the Chief Minister announced, from 15 May organised training can commence and then it is beyond that that the competition would—and we will work with sporting organisations on how they can prepare their arena to meet the health principles of physical distancing and hygiene to best care for their players and spectators. That is really important.

A lot of people have seen that information. They are excited, but they are also very anxious. It is through enacting those principles that we will keep the Territory safe.

**Mr GUNNER:** It will essentially be a simple check list people will be able to go through about how they do that ...

**Madam CHAIR:** I want to give the Member for Daly an opportunity to ask questions he has indicated he has on Health.

**Mr HIGGINS:** My question is in regard to Indigenous health and the impact on Indigenous people. We know that one of the biggest problems we have is overcrowding in houses, which would lead to the pretty quick spread if it gets into a community. Have we started to look at—we are coming into the Dry Season in the Top End at the moment and a lot of these people really like to get out to country. There are a lot of outstations. Have we looked at assisting the shires in the sense of giving them funding to facilitate some of that so that we get some separation?

We talk about all this social separation, et cetera; this is about separating people. Have we considered that? Have we allocated any money to put towards that? There are a lot of houses in outstations that are under-utilised. So, could we get a bit of separation there?

We have a lot of NGOs, like the Menzies School of Health. I have a long-term relationship with a lot of them. Are we involving them and other NGOs in communicating this? Many of these people do not speak English. Have we put any stock, or do we have plans of putting any stock, or speeding up in the development of new houses?

I know there are multiple questions but I thought I would get them all out in one go.

**Mr GUNNER:** That is okay, Member for Daly. I have asked Mr Cowan to join us at the front. He has been doing a lot of the work through our taskforce with the land councils, APO NT and AMSANT et cetera, about

how we manage a lot of this stuff within the biosecurity regions. I will get Andy to talk to the question about movement between town and homelands. We made a deliberate decision on how we brought in the biosecurity regions.

When we first started doing this under essential/non-essential travel, it was about the 76 communities. When we went to do the biosecurity regions, we said that we have to better acknowledge how people move between community and homeland and not set up barriers. We settled for the shire boundary system to allow movement back and forth.

We have been doing a lot of work with interpreters in language in communities with many people and NGOs. I am not sure if Andy is okay to answer that one or if we should go to others.

Then the final question about repairs and maintenance. What we negotiated today—we are still having conversations about this with land councils and others—is that they were happy for people to continue their existing works, that is, people who are already in community. They were reluctant to consider new people coming in, new works commencing and new supplies coming in for those works. We are trying to negotiate a continuation of the work; we think it is important. The housing department has been doing work to get more work done outside so that we are not losing time. Andy will talk about how we keep negotiating the ability for people to keep working inside the bubble.

They are the three questions, I think. I will throw to Mr Cowan.

**Mr HIGGINS:** Chief Minister, before he answers the one about the outstations and the biosecurity circle, I completely understand allowing them to go back and forth. However, a lot of people in some of the bigger communities do not just go back and forth each year when the Dry Season comes. They have to arrange for the council, or whatever, to move them to the outstations and help them get there and get back for shopping, et cetera. That is always an impost on the council. The question was more about whether we have looked at facilitating that to make it a bit easier in that regard.

**Mr GUNNER:** Apologies. I get that. I will pass to Andy on that. Sorry, in summing up, I did not touch on that. I was framing my answer before handing it to Mr Cowan. I was saying that we have to create as safe travel as possible. Mr Cowan will now talk to how we are helping negotiate out that travel.

**Mr COWAN:** There has been strong messaging about people moving back to country. Through that messaging, the safest place is being in your community. There has been a strong desire from a lot of communities to move back to homelands.

We have been working closely in partnership with the land councils, predominantly, on this and looking at how we can line up our existing homelands funding to support any minor new works or infrastructure upgrades that need to take place to ensure people are comfortable and okay moving back to country.

We have worked closely with Minister Wyatt's agency, the National Indigenous Australians Agency. There was a commitment of \$10m made by the Commonwealth Government through Minister Wyatt to support all four land councils across the Territory. That money was targeted predominantly to support the transport and any minor upgrades that were required to support communities and community members moving back to homelands. That was \$4m for the larger land councils, CLC and NLC, and \$1m for Tiwi Land Council and Anindilyakwa Land Council.

They are all approaching that differently but people are being supported both through delivery of foods from that funding in partnership with our networks across the Territory through our regional offices. People are working very closely and it is a really good partnership in regard to our relationship at a Commonwealth level, with the land councils, the Aboriginal-controlled sector and our staff on the ground.

In regard to some of the upgrades, I think you touched on some of the infrastructure works that were happening. As part of the biosecurity determination, when we initially negotiated this Commonwealth legislation—being mindful this is across Queensland, South Australia, Northern Territory and WA so this was a decision from National Cabinet—we managed to secure the existing infrastructure programs in remote communities as an essential activity to keep people in work on communities to address our current situation of overcrowding and to ensure those people continued those contracts.

We have had a number of meetings with the land councils to look at how we can ensure work continues. Andrew Kirkman, the CEO of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics, is working very closely with all the land councils on how we can keep our capital works programs going safely.



In regard to the communications, that has been a really big effort across the Territory. When this broke, one of the first things we did was look at setting up our Coronavirus website to ensure we had a single point of truth for information. That has been a challenge, as the Chief Minister and Jamie Chalker mentioned—communications from other jurisdictions and what is truth and what is not. The decision was made to use a website that was our single point of truth.

We quickly started working with our Indigenous language services and in the first couple of weeks we set up messaging in 18 languages across the Territory. Following that we funded the NLC and the Aboriginal-controlled health sector to develop posters and short videos which they have shared across a number of social media channels and also through their own websites. They have been really important to get the messages out to all regions of the Territory. We also worked with the First Nations national media to ensure that there is good reach with that.

The other thing we have done within our regional areas is ensure we are working with local traditional owners and communities through their own language centres—ARDS in East Arnhem or Anindilyakwa Language Centre on Groote Eylandt—and ensure we have local people passing messages to their family members and community.

There has been a lot of work in that space and a lot is continuing. It has been a challenge in regard to our communications. What we have also been doing, quite successfully, when there has been misinformation—for example, there were concerns early on in COVID-19 response that there was a case in Maningrida. We have been using social media to geocache that community and ensure correct facts are passed on through consultation with health agencies to quickly shut down rumour mills. As you understand with social media, some of that stuff moves pretty quickly.

**Ms FYLES:** We have been doing a lot of work in the health-specific aspect with our remote Indigenous communities. We have been doing remote pandemic plans for each community to look at how we would respond and working strongly with the Aboriginal medical organisations. I acknowledge their work. Thirty-odd of the 80 remote clinics in the Northern Territory are run by those organisations.

We also have done scenario testing in the Top End and Alice Springs because we are planning for the unknown. We do not know what will happen and when it will happen. Will it be one case that is possibly removed from a community or a number of people mildly unwell? We just simply do not know.

The other thing is the AUSMAT resource—the National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre—is very well planned. Logistics have looked at how they would roll that out, whether they would—as you saw in Tasmania, two hospitals shut down by the Coronavirus. In the Territory that would have a huge impact. It is not like in Sydney or Melbourne, where if you shut one hospital you can transfer everyone to another hospital.

The National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre is crucial in our planning. It is also crucial in the ability of deploying it in parts across very remote areas of the Territory; they have done that work.

There has been significant planning in the remote setting involving community, community leadership and particularly health leadership.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Daly, do you have further questions on Health?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Could I just expand on that a bit? The issue is it is not a matter of a lack of planning. I acknowledge that a lot planning has gone into this. The issues I have is that we have massive overcrowding in these houses and, if something happens out there, we have all the plans in place but it will cost us a fortune. Now Andy said that they funded \$4m or \$5m to the land councils to help with some of this.

Is there additional funding to be made available to help people get out to these outstations and get outstations to some reasonable habitable level, especially during the Dry Season. We talk about this being a problem for six months; hopefully the Dry will last six months.

Our tradies scheme—and I am not criticising this at all, Chief Minister—went from \$30m to \$60m and then \$100m. I have heard \$4m mentioned in regard to the land councils helping to facilitate it. I think we need to throw more than the kitchen sink at this one.

**Mr GUNNER:** The biggest issue with doing works on homelands is we need permission from the land councils. There is money outside of all of this for homelands spending—\$45m was identified out of the ABA, for example, for investment on homelands.

The problem here is not so much getting access to the cash, it would be getting permission to do the work on a homeland. That is my understanding of it at the moment. I think Andy was talking about different money for different reasons than what you are going to.

I misunderstood that in your original question. I thought it was about helping people get to a homeland, not do work on a homeland. The biggest issue at the moment is getting permission for that work to be done, but money has been earmarked already for work on homelands.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Daly is that the last of your questions on Health?

**Mr HIGGINS:** Yes, that will do me for the moment.

**Madam CHAIR:** Member for Spillett, do you have any questions on Health?

**Ms FINOCCHIARO:** I do, thank you. Similar to what I asked the police commissioner—and again, thank you to your agency and everyone involved in providing that health responses. It speaks for itself, given the situation we find ourselves in today, which is extremely important. It has been terrific to know that we have not had community transmission and are where we are now.

In terms of budget pressure, clearly your agency had to have a tremendous response. I am sure you needed additional infrastructure, resources, staff and a range of flexibility to be able to provide the response you have. How is that working for your agency? Do you know what budget implications the COVID response has had? Have you had to seek Treasurer's advances or are you finding the money from within?

**Ms FYLES:** We are very responsible with our budget. We thank you for the question, because it is important even during this crisis that we do not simply throw around—as you would constantly remind me, Member for Spillett—taxpayer dollars. It is not my own money. You would know that health is a complicated formula of funding.

We receive activity-based funding from the federal government, as well as the contribution from the Northern Territory. As the Chair of the Health COAG, I have been working strongly with the Commonwealth Government. There have been some intricate conversations at times across the board to make sure, as we see a decline in our usual activity base and an increased in COVID preparation, that funding and support is there.

The federal government has been very responsive. Respiratory clinics have been set up in the Northern Territory. They have been very reasonable in providing requests, or at least assessing them on merit.

I will hand to Catherine regarding the Health budget in a moment. We have seen a decrease in our normal activities. You will be well aware of what is often called elective surgery, which is not cosmetic surgery but non-urgent surgery that is categorised clinically as that. Category 2 and 3 surgeries were pushed out and deferred as we prepared for the Coronavirus. This week we started some of the Category 2 surgeries. It was great to be able to treat those patients.

In one sense, one area of Health has had to really step up, but another area of Health has seen an ease, potentially, but we still have our staff.

The other intricate part of this was private hospitals. That was a huge step forward but a resource for Australians in the wake of the Coronavirus. We have seen what has happened with Coronavirus in Europe and America. Touch wood, fortunately, we have not seen that yet in Australia.

There were some complex conversations about resources and the funding of those resources and the Commonwealth and Territory governments have worked together on this.

In our budget we have the largest single portion of the NT government budget in Health. Going forward, it has been managed very responsibly. Catherine has some specific figures we are happy to share with you.

**Professor STODDART:** The Health position is anticipated—the forecast is as it has stood for most of the year because we have been able to redeploy some staff into other roles to reshape our organisation to respond to the COVID crisis.

We have a \$42m NDIS projection, which is standard for us in the new wake of NDIS. Without that, we would expect to have an \$18m surplus, which is actually—sorry, I will explain that in a different way. We will have an overspend of \$24m, but that includes an allocation of \$42m for NDIS.

In that shape, we saw that position earlier in the year. We have been working very hard to maintain a strong budget position. We have been very confident about reshaping our budget to meet the COVID crisis.

We expect to incur about \$13.5m of direct costs until the end of May as a result of COVID, but we have been working very hard with the Commonwealth, where we have an MPA specifically for COVID. That is for 50% of the funding. That is about \$4.5m a month on an average spend of \$158m a month, so it is a small proportion overall.

**Mrs FINOCCHIARO:** Thank you.

**Ms FYLES:** Private hospital arrangements were made Australia-wide under COVID-19—again, under a national partnership agreement for payments with the private hospitals. We worked on that with the Darwin Private Hospital. The National Critical Care and Trauma Centre is a federal government resource we are very fortunate and grateful to have in the Territory. That funding is Commonwealth.

We have been well-supported by the Commonwealth Government. I acknowledge the Department of Health. It has done an enormous amount of clinical and planning work. We have also seen the change of delivery of services. For example, instead of people coming in from Nhulunbuy, we had clinicians go there to deliver services. We tried to be as flexible as we can to make sure people get the clinical care they need. Using TeleHealth is an obvious one, as we are using Telepresence today.

There has been complex work but we are very focused, as the Treasurer reminds us to be, on our budget, but at the same time making sure we have the health response to Coronavirus.

**Mr MILLS:** Listening to all I have heard up to this point—and the objective is to save lives—you gain the impression that the objective is to completely eradicate COVID-19 so that it no longer exists, then we are all safe and all lives have been saved.

It seems to defy logic because the next step will be the relaxation of biosecurity areas. The borders will open up and people will start moving around the country and one day they might go to Bali and come back. Are we really looking at a post-COVID-19, where it does not exist anymore? That is the impression being gained here.

**Mr GUNNER:** We have a suppression strategy. It looks like it may lead to an eradication or elimination result. We are trying to find a way to have a sustainable long-term approach to that suppression strategy. We are in the position to look at how to switch to the new normal earlier than others because of medical results regarding Coronavirus.

Our strategy is in three parts. First is to secure Territory border to significantly reduce the risk of Coronavirus entering, but I cannot guarantee that it will not enter. The second part is to test, trace and trap so we can contain Coronavirus as it appears as quickly as possible and the third is to create the new normal to ensure no rapid spread.

That is our strategy. By having that in place we can adjust things in the Northern Territory to a more sustainable level. We can only ask what we asked of Territorians for as long as we did. It was getting to a point where the Commissioner made an informed comment to me that Territorians were noticing that we were seven or fourteen days COVID-19 free and asking, 'How long will you ask us to do this?'

How do we adjust to a new normal? We are trying to set the Territory up for not experiencing the second wave that we saw in other places. If Coronavirus comes—and we are doing everything we can to ensure it does not—we will find it quickly and ensure no rapid spread. By having that strategy, we can allow businesses to open and return to the new normal.

I want to be really clear that the suppression strategy in place and what we are experiencing as a country—the Prime Minister spoke about this, too—will mean an eradication result, which is extraordinary. I thank Territorians and the Prime Minister thanks Australians; it is quite a remarkable result.

**Mr MILLS:** The real world and what comes next will require some level of herd immunity. What part does that play in this? Will we ever be prepared for some exposure to COVID-19 going forward or are we living

under the impression that we have all done a wonderful job, we were not allowed to set off crackers, we stood on our front driveways, the economy collapsed—and we cannot talk about that—and COVID-19 will go? What if we go on a trip to Bali and get on an Air Asia or Jetstar plane and get exposed to it but do not have the capacity to respond to it because we have never been exposed to it and thought it was gone?

**Mr GUNNER:** I think it will be a long time before anyone gets on a plane to Bali. My reason is the Territory borders will stay in place for an indeterminate amount of time. I need to do what I can to guarantee the health and safety of Territorians. We have a population so vulnerable that we could not ever countenance the herd immunity strategy that Britain flirted with—no sorry, put in place—and then walked back from.

I will get Hugh to comment on this because AHPPC considered this in great detail and made recommendations about going down the suppression path and against the herd immunity path.

**Dr HEGGIE:** It is important to understand what we do not know about this virus. We know that in other viral illnesses which cause harm, such as measles, if you have disease transmission or vaccination through a community over time—or both—there will be a significant amount of the community who are immune and there will be no carriage by many people to infect people who are not protected.

With this, we do not know about herd immunity or whether it will occur. Secondly, we do not know if it is possible for a person who has been infected and recovered to get it again. It is the unknowns about a novel viral pandemic.

It is important that we have vigilance—and the Chief Minister stated that we look after our vulnerabilities. Our biggest vulnerability is international travel.

Because of the Territory's proximity to Indonesia—if I could say it respectfully. Indonesia only has, I think, one test per 25 000 people. A lot of people who are affected or infected and have died, and we do not know whether they died from that or not.

In the UK, particularly, and Europe the issues of people dying in aged care facilities—and for your information in Europe, including the UK, 50% of deaths were in residential aged care facilities. People died there and are not recorded at this stage of having the disease.

In mainland China that is the case, too. We heard commentary about whether China accurately reported. The issue was, I guess, that things were happening so quickly, as we have seen around the country, that deaths occur where people are not even diagnosed.

I think the answer to this is the vigilance. We have had enough time to prepare for this; that is important. Then we need to gather the evidence as we move forward. I do not think that, at any point so, far crowd immunity is even contemplated as a solution.

A treatment or a vaccine, or a combination of a vaccine or a treatment including old vaccines, is yet to be ascertained. There are some candidate products but these are at very early stages. I come from a research pharmacology background so I can speak to this. It has to go through a whole lot of checks and balances of safety before we contemplate that. We are talking about possibly sometime next year before that occurs, so we cannot wait until a vaccine comes, we need things in place.

Broadly, if all of us practised the principles based on the evidence that droplet spread will come from here—if I was to sneeze or cough—and drop to the ground in about ten seconds. If you are at least half a metre, but probably one-and-a-half metres, you will immediately have much less risk of transmission of the disease.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Heggie. Out of courtesy, do you want to finish that line ...

**Mr MILLS:** No, that is alright. It is a very worrying future.

**Madam CHAIR:** Thank you, Member for Blain.

The time now being four o'clock, I declare this hearing of the Public Accounts Committee closed. Thank you everyone for your participation. I make a special mention to the Legislative Assembly staff for their supportive today under extremely strange and unusual measures.

I ask the PAC members to remain for the second part of our deliberative meeting.

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The committee concluded.

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