

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Financial support for states and territories for quarantine capacity

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0231

Type of question: Hansard, page 16, 26 November 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 10 December 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator RICE: Is the Commonwealth providing any extra financial support to the states and territories for quarantine capacity?

Ms Frame: As you know, the Commonwealth is providing financial support through the national partnership agreement.

Senator RICE: Is there a plan for that to increase over the coming months?

Ms Frame: We are certainly working directly with the Tasmanian and Northern Territory governments to provide an increase in support for their quarantining arrangements, yes.

Senator RICE: Can you then take on notice or tell me now what increased financial support has been provided to the ACT and Tasmania?

Ms Frame: I'll take that on notice.

Answer:

The Commonwealth has provided a range of support for returning Australians, including fully funded rescue flights from Wuhan and for passengers on the Ruby Princess cruise ship; facilitated flights for returning Australians; consular support and financial assistance for vulnerable Australians overseas; Australian Defence Force and Australian Medical Assistance Team personnel to support the states' responses; and information to help people prepare for quarantine, including resources to support their mental health.

In addition, the Commonwealth is providing financial support to the Northern Territory and Tasmania for the Provision of COVID-19 Quarantine Arrangements for Organised National Repatriation of Australians, tailored to the quarantine facility and capacity.

The Northern Territory and the Commonwealth signed a bilateral agreement on 20 October 2020 which will provide an estimated \$243.7 million to the Northern Territory for the provision of repatriation quarantine services until 31 December 2021.

The Commonwealth and the Northern Territory have also agreed to work together on options to further increase quarantine capacity through an expansion of the Howard Springs quarantine facility.

Tasmania and the Commonwealth signed a bilateral agreement on 4 December 2020 for the provision of repatriation quarantine services. As the agreement is not due to expire until 31 March 2021, the final amount to be paid under the Agreement is dependent on the actual costs incurred by Tasmania which is yet to be determined.

Funding includes quarantine provision and accommodation, health and welfare services and facility operations costs and, in the case of the Northern Territory, capital expenditure.

Funding scope differs between jurisdictions as each quarantine funding model is designed to meet each jurisdiction's model of quarantine and implementation within their state health and welfare systems.

Funding agreements are published on the Council on Federal Financial Relations website: <https://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/>.

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Identification of National Quarantine Site

Senator: Siewert

Question reference number: 0232

Type of question: Hansard, page 26, 26 November 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 10 December 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: I have a few questions about quarantining and the identification of a national site. Firstly, is there any work being done to try and identify a national site beyond Howard Springs?

Ms Frame: As Ms Edwards explained earlier, we continue to be open to any other opportunities or sites that are presented to us from state and territory governments. At the moment, we are very close to expanding the capacity of Howard Springs further. It was pointed out in Ms Halton's report as uniquely and very well placed to serve that function, and we're continuing to invest in Howard Springs and expanding that capacity.

Senator SIEWERT: Your answer was, 'We're looking if states and territories present it.' My question was: is there any work—and I will be more specific now—being done by the Commonwealth to identify a national site outside of anything the state and territories may decide that they are going to suggest to you?

Ms Frame: Ms Rendina and others have presented on limitations with Commonwealth sites that have been considered and what the constraints have been on those sites. To my knowledge—but I'll take it on notice—there are no other sites that are well positioned at the moment to be utilised. But I will take it on notice and see if there are any other sites that meet the criteria.

Answer:

The Commonwealth Government is continuing to work with states and territories to balance the need to bring Australian citizens home while ensuring that state and territory public health systems and resources are not overwhelmed. States and territories need to be involved in identifying the most appropriate potential sites for quarantine capacity, reflecting their experience and the practicalities of an effective quarantine system, which needs to bring together healthcare, logistics and law enforcement aspects to minimise risks. Current advice to the Commonwealth is that hotel quarantine, taking all the aforementioned factors, is the optimal solution.

The Commonwealth has expanded the Howard Springs quarantine facility from 500 to 850 individuals per fortnight. The Commonwealth is also supporting the Tasmanian Government to provide quarantine services for Australians returning from overseas. The Commonwealth and the Northern Territory have also agreed to work together on options to further increase quarantine capacity through an expansion of the Howard Springs quarantine facility. Tasmania and the Commonwealth signed a bilateral agreement on 4 December 2020 for the provision of repatriation quarantine services.

The Department of Defence has been looking at the potential to use all Defence facilities in supporting returning Australians. Defence facilities were found to be generally not suitable for quarantine health requirements for a variety of reasons, such as an inability to segregate cohorts appropriately and lack of appropriate proximity to intensive care facilities. These facilities are also not sufficiently separated from the daily operations of the base to eliminate the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to Defence personnel, the consequence of which could impact on Defence readiness.

Multiple other Commonwealth facilities, such as detention centres, have been assessed to support returning Australians and have been deemed unsuitable for operating as quarantine facilities. This is due to limited capacity or based on health advice (e.g. not within reasonable proximity of a tertiary hospital capable of managing a number of seriously ill individuals and other acute care needs at the same time).