

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: Review of Hotel Quarantine Arrangements by Ms Jane Halton AO

Senator: Gallagher

Question reference number: 0221

Type of question: Hansard, page 30, 24 September 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 9 October 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

CHAIR: Has the Prime Minister asked the COVID commission to look at solutions for this—the COVID commission was set up to, in the Prime Minister's terms, 'solve problems during COVID-19'. Is this on the COVID commission or the COVID commission advisory group's agenda?

Ms Foster: The challenge that we're facing relates, as both Ms Frame and Mr Duggan have said, to the availability of safe, effective quarantine, and that's not an issue, which I believe the COVID commission has—

CHAIR: So it's not on their agenda? Okay.

Ms Foster: a role to play in because it's about public health capability, not about business interests.

CHAIR: We'll come to the public health capability.

Mr Duggan: Actually there is one element to that, though, which is the review that Ms Jane Halton is conducting from within the COVID commission and which gets to the point of hotel quarantining—

CHAIR: Yes, but I don't believe that has been released publicly—

Ms Foster: It's not yet completed.

Ms Frame: It's not yet completed.

CHAIR: Right.

Ms Frame: It's due to be submitted to the national cabinet in October.

CHAIR: But I believe that she briefed national cabinet.

Ms Frame: She has briefed national cabinet on two occasions, yes.

CHAIR: I'm sure I read somewhere that she briefed them on the findings of her report, that it had been completed.

Ms Frame: She briefed them in August and again last Friday, to give them an update. The report has not been completed and submitted but she provided the national cabinet with an update.

CHAIR: Is it going to be released publicly?

Ms Frame: I'll have to take that on notice. It was a report for the national cabinet and I'll have to confirm that.

CHAIR: Paid for by taxpayers.

Ms Frame: I will confirm that; I just don't know. I'll get you the right information.

Answer:

Public release of the final report is a matter for the National Cabinet.

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: The Prime Minister's discussions with Heads of Mission

Senator: Gallagher

Question reference number: 0222

Type of question: Hansard, page 30, 24 September 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 9 October 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

CHAIR: Okay. Do you know if the Prime Minister has discussed the issue of stranded Australians with any heads of mission? He has some pretty close friends overseas at the moment—Mr Brandis, for example. Are you aware if he has spoken to any of those people about the situation that Australians find themselves in?

Ms Millar: I don't have the answer to that question, although we can certainly take it on notice. DFAT may be able to assist with that—they are DFAT's posts overseas.

Answer:

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet is not aware of any call between the Prime Minister, the Hon Scott Morrison MP, and an Australian Head of Mission on this subject.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Australian Government capacity to employ a public health work force to run quarantine facilities

Senator: Keneally

Question reference number: 0223

Type of question: Hansard, page 33, 24 September 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 9 October 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

CHAIR: Yes, but my question is have you gone out and looked at how you procure—I can see you deployed a \$3½ million health work force contract a few weeks ago. The Commonwealth are out there doing it, they're doing it in other areas, so why not to run quarantine facilities and support extra Australians to return home?

Ms Frame: We are actively considering all options.

CHAIR: Yes, but my point is that if all of this has been on the table or is being looked at and has been seen as the constraint since before July, why are we in September with 35,000 Australians, many of them in dire circumstances, 4,000 of them considered vulnerable, stuck overseas with Australian passports and unable to return?

Ms Frame: As I said, I'm not sure there's much more I can add, other than we are actively looking at everything possible to increase the capacity to support quarantine and get as many Australians home as possible. We have a public health workforce that are really deeply engaged in COVID-19 responses across the whole country. There is not an abundance of public health professionals who are just idle and ready to be utilised in that respect, but we are actively looking at wherever resourcing might be, how we can assist the states and what capacity the Commonwealth might have to assist further.

Senator KENEALLY: Ms Frame, if I could address the question in this way, then: you've just said to use that you don't believe there is that capacity. I think what Senator Gallagher's question was trying to go to was: have you actually tested the market? Have you actually tried?

Ms Frame: I haven't in my role.

Senator KENEALLY: I don't mean you, personally. I mean has the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet or the Commonwealth actually tried?

Ms Frame: I'll take it on notice, because I would need to talk to colleagues in the Department of Health. The Department of PM&C has not, to my awareness, but I would need to talk to Health. They may well have more information in that regard.

Senator KENEALLY: Our job as committee members to oversight the Commonwealth's response, to think about what recommendations we might make. It would be incredibly useful to know, when we hear evidence from officials that the capacity, in your view, to provide a

public health monitoring of an expanded quarantine system does not exist, what evidence you are basing that claim on.

Ms Frame: I don't believe that's what I said. I said I will talk to the Department of Health. I can get you the information. I will take it on notice and find out what capacity exists. As I said, it's under very active consideration, and we are working together across the government to look into all options and where the Commonwealth can assist states further and where the Commonwealth can assist directly to increase quarantine capacity in the country so that more Australians can return home. I'll get you the exact information.

Senator KENEALLY: That would be really useful.

Answer:

On 27 March 2020, the National Cabinet agreed states and territories (States) would meet the costs of hotel quarantine, and determine any contributions required from travellers arriving within their jurisdictions, as mandatory hotel quarantine requirements are implemented under relevant State legislation.

The National Cabinet also agreed that the Commonwealth would provide support through the Australian Defence Force and the Australian Border Force where necessary.

This reflects the practicalities of an effective quarantine system, which needs to bring together healthcare, logistics and law enforcement.

The Commonwealth has no contracts with providers to run quarantine facilities.

The Commonwealth is continuing to work with States to balance the need to bring Australian citizens home with ensuring that State public health systems, and resources are not overwhelmed.

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: Number of public health professionals that would be required per number head at quarantine site

Senator: Keneally

Question reference number: 0224

Type of question: Hansard, page 34, 24 September 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 9 October 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator KENEALLY: I'd like to ask one you can take on notice. Could you also provide to us your assessment or your understanding of the number of public health officials that would be required per number of head at a quarantine site. I'd like to know if you've done that work, if you have that understanding and if you could provide the committee with that information.

Ms Frame: I'll take that on notice. I know that is specifically work that Ms Halton has been undertaking in her review of quarantine and what will ensure an effective quarantine program. I don't have that exact number from Ms Halton, but I know that is work she has been doing, and I'll take it on notice.

Answer:

The Department of Health has provided advice that an adequate ongoing staffing model for quarantine accommodation requires a minimum of two staff per 40 residents on a 24/7 basis. A staff of 22 public health officials and administrative support would be needed to establish a quarantine accommodation site for up to 250 residents. For ongoing support, other health services should include:

- primary care, pharmacy access, and clinical and mental health services required on site and accessible 24/7
- emergency call arrangements for residents requiring medical assistance
- daily health checks of residents by senior experienced nursing staff
- the ability to escalate cases to acute care services, including mental health services
- facility needs to be within 60 minutes travel of a hospital with appropriate acute care facilities, including an Intensive Care Unit.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Barriers to Commonwealth funding of resources to the states

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0225

Type of question: Hansard, pages 35-36, 24 September 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 9 October 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator RICE: Are there any barriers, as far as you're aware, to the Commonwealth offering to pay for extra resources that the states need, whether that is hotel quarantine or extra workforce?

Ms Frame: Under the current arrangements—what was announced after the national cabinet meeting on 27 March—the states would be covering the costs of the quarantine arrangements, including capacity for copayments by individuals affected. So, the states are paying for the quarantine arrangements—

Senator RICE: That's not the question I asked, though. The question I asked was: are there any barriers to the Commonwealth offering to pay or being able to take on more of a role for paying for that hotel quarantine?

Ms Frame: Under the current national partnership agreement with COVID—as you know, the Commonwealth is contributing a lot of additional funds to states, on a fifty-fifty cost-sharing arrangement—the quarantine costs are not currently covered under that COVID agreement.

Senator RICE: Would the Commonwealth be open to funding extra quarantine places?

Ms Frame: I can't answer that question. I'm not aware of any requests in that regard. I'm happy to take that on notice.

Senator RICE: Okay.

Answer:

Please refer to Question on Notice 0223.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Discussions regarding the use of electronic tracking devices between the Commonwealth and the states

Senator: Rice

Question reference number: 0226

Type of question: Hansard, page 39, 24 September 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 9 October 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator RICE: Could I just ask one question on notice?

CHAIR: Sure.

Senator RICE: Can you take on notice any investigation and discussion of the use of electronic tracking devices—electronic bracelets, for example—that the Commonwealth is exploring with the states?

Ms Frame: We will take that on notice.

Answer:

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet is not aware of any investigation or discussion of the use of electronic tracking devices between the Commonwealth and states and territories.

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: Negotiations with airlines in relation to the distribution of seating availability

Senator: Siewert

Question reference number: 0227

Type of question: Hansard, page 39, 24 September 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Friday 9 October 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: Could I also put one on notice? Could the department take on notice what work has been done with the airlines? The evidence we got this morning suggests some of the airlines are picking and choosing, in terms of who gets a seat. Can you take on notice: have you been working with the airlines or addressing that issue to see if, in fact, that is the case?

CHAIR: Thank you, Senator Siewert. There were nods at the table.

Answer:

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) has not held discussions with international airlines regarding the distribution of seat availability.

It is a matter for the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.