

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

COVID-19 PANDEMIC HEARINGS



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER 2020**

SESSION ONE

Members

**Mr P.A. Katsambanis (Chairman)
Mr M.J. Folkard (Deputy Chairman)
Ms L. Mettam
Mr S.K. L'Estrange
Mr D.T. Punch**

Hearing commenced at 9.43 am**Commissioner CHRISTOPHER JOHN DAWSON****Commissioner of Police, Western Australia Police Force; and State Emergency Coordinator, examined:****Mr COLIN BLANCH****Deputy Commissioner, Western Australia Police Force, examined:****Mr PAUL STEEL****Acting Deputy Commissioner, Western Australia Police Force, examined:**

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for agreeing to appear here today. One of the functions of our committee is to review the agencies within its portfolio of responsibilities, which includes police, emergency services and emergency response. From time to time, the committee will conduct agency review hearings. Today, we have asked you here to provide evidence in relation to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Western Australia. I am Peter Katsambanis and I am the Chair of the committee. I will introduce you to the other members: member for Bunbury, Don Punch; member for Churchlands, Sean L'Estrange; member for Vasse, Libby Mettam; and the Deputy Chair, Mark Folkard, is an apology today. It is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Your evidence is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, this privilege does not apply to anything you might say outside of today's proceedings.

Before we begin, do you have any questions about your attendance here today?

Mr DAWSON: No.

The CHAIR: Do you have any brief opening statement you wanted to make?

Mr DAWSON: Yes, please.

The CHAIR: Before you do, I will just let you know that I have authorised media to take video only, no audio, for just a few minutes and then they will depart, or the camera will depart anyway. It is a public hearing so anyone can be here.

Mr DAWSON: Thank you, Chair and members, for the opportunity to address you and appear. To further extend the roles of my colleagues here, Mr Blanch substantively manages areas governing state crime, emergency services and counterterrorism, state intelligence and others. He has been deputising for me in chairing the State Emergency Coordination Group and I will expand on that in my opening statement. Mr Steel's role functionally is to head up the strategic and operational lead for Western Australia police in the way that we both respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and liaise with other government agencies, in particular the Department of Health.

Thanks for the opportunity for a couple of brief comments and thank you for the questions that you posed in the letter of invitation. Everyone will be aware, of course, that the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic on 11 March. On 15 March, in my capacity as the State Emergency Coordinator under the Emergency Management Act, I advised government and in particular the Minister for Emergency Services being responsible under the act to consider declaring a state of emergency in Western Australia. Since the act was enacted in 2005, there has never been a state of emergency ever enacted or enlivened under this legislation, so it was a significant

declaration that was made. There have been and there is provision for the Emergency Management Act to declare emergency situations—(1A) below. That has occurred on 16 prior occasions and I have been involved as the SEC in providing some governance and stewardship, along with the prospective hazard management agencies, depending on the nature of the hazards.

Most of those 16 emergency situations—in fact, all of them have been natural-type hazards such as cyclones, bushfires and floods et cetera. This is the first such pandemic, certainly a human pandemic involving biosecurity issues, that the state has ever had to deal with. The effect of that and some of the questions that you have posed in the letter of invitation go to: How do the various management agencies interact with each other? What is the knowledge gained from the management of this ongoing state of emergency? And are there any learnings? To provide the committee with a brief overview of that, you will all no doubt be aware that beneath the legislation sits the State Emergency Management Committee within that.

I know that Dr Edwards appeared before you several weeks ago and provided an overview there; I will not repeat all that, but I will say that the role that the hazard management agency has, and specifically the individual Dr Andy Robertson as the Chief Health Officer is quite fundamental to the response to the Western Australian state in terms of how we are managing this. My role as the State Emergency Coordinator is not to direct all operations but more to ensure that we have a statewide coverage and coordination. That is not confined to government agencies. I and my staff and indeed a lot of other agencies have a lot to do with local government at a state level, a national level and, indeed, an international level because it is global. Also there is a lot of liaison that occurs with industry groups and the community themselves. I can provide the committee with some more expansive explanation on how that does occur.

The State Disaster Council had never sat previously until March this year and that is because we have never had a declared state of emergency. With that, one of my functional roles under the act is to provide advice to that State Disaster Council. We have met on 26 occasions and it comprises the Premier chairing it and a number of ministers, predominantly the Deputy Chair is the Minister for Emergency Services and there are cabinet ministers who sit on that, as I do, as does the Chief Health Officer Dr Robertson, as does the director general of the Department of Health, Dr David Russell-Weisz. With that cohort there while we have met on 26 occasions, I and the Chief Health Officer and the director general of Health, amongst others, have routinely and regularly briefed both the Premier and the Deputy Premier or Minister for Health on well over 100 instances since February and March.

That is an ongoing, I would say, not just briefing, but dialogue or discussion. That, of course, then translates into decisions that I have to make as the State Emergency Coordinator on whether there should be declarations or authorisations such as quarantine matters, such as restricting movement of people or vehicles, a whole host of issues that have resulted in Western Australia now recording, as of today, some 665 cases out of the Australian total of 26 781. Western Australians are enjoying—it is not a matter to be celebrated, but we have a very safe community. I commend all Western Australians, not just the authorities, for really what I would describe as their consent to actually adhere to all of the advice about social distancing, good hygiene and adapting and adopting all of the guidelines and directions that by law do have penalties.

[9.50 am]

But we have, as an enforcement body, adopted an approach that I describe as “policing by consent”; that is, if we explain to the community and we have put in comprehensive communication—there have been over 90 million views to the Western Australian government website about this matter. We have fielded over 150 000 phone calls from the community and we are processing thousands of

applications for people who are moving in and out of Western Australia. With that, there is a high volume of activity, but the end result is that the tragedy of nine deaths is really one that if you put it into context in the Australian setting—with now, as of today, 859 deaths nationally—and compare it to the international situation where there are now, even in the USA, over 200 000 deaths, yes, there are population differences, but I would like to set out before the committee that the legislative structures, committees, processes, policies and plans, and ultimately the directions that have been provided, I think have stood the state very well. I am certain that the committee will want to ask me further questions about whether there are things that we can improve, and I am happy to respond to those, but they are my opening remarks and I am happy to take any questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You do have that dual role of police commissioner and also State Emergency Coordinator. Just taking the police side of it for the moment, what police resources do you currently have dedicated to the COVID response and what further resources do you think you envisage you need going forward?

Mr DAWSON: Thank you, Chair. Of our sworn component of police, we have just under 7 000—some 6 800-odd. All of them, of course, have a duty to both monitor and enforce the law and, in this case, the Emergency Management Act. But as far as dedicated officers that are on their day-to-day activities, we have in the order of 400 to 500, but that will surge—ebb and flow—depending on the particular circumstances. When we had cruise ships arriving—you would be aware of the vessel *Artania* and another one called *Vasco da Gama*—and we had to basically process lots of people over several days, we just put additional resources to that. When we had nine regional boundaries in which we were conducting vehicle checkpoints, we monitored over 850 000 vehicles movements. That required us to deploy several thousand police. My answer, I guess, is that it is contextual to what the particular emergency and pandemic has been operating in. What the infections were in March, April and May is a very different context to what has happened subsequently since April. We have had no community infections since 12 April. So we have been able to reduce, but we must do compliance checks on people in quarantine every day. We have had just under the order of 2 000 people in hotel quarantine. Under Mr Steel's Operation Tide, we have conducted in the order of 45 000 physical checks on people who are isolated in home and/or in hotel quarantine. It is a bit of a moving feast.

The CHAIR: Sure, but there is around 400 to 500 who are dedicated full-time to that role.

Mr DAWSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Because anecdotally it has been talked about that there are 400, but clearly there have been more than 400 dedicated full-time now to this.

Mr DAWSON: Depending, of course, on the particular situation.

The CHAIR: Where are we at now? Can you give me a ballpark figure?

Mr DAWSON: Unless Mr Steel has more accurate figures than me, it would be in the order of 400.

Mr STEEL: Yes. In Operation Tide currently at the moment there are 380 people, which includes some police staff. We also have to accept that in regional Western Australia we are manning borders at the Kununurra–Northern Territory border and also down at Eucla. There are some officers from regional WA who are cycling through, maintaining those roles, as well as compliance checking in regional Western Australia. Those are officers with dual roles. They will also have responsibility for their community but we are tasking them specifically at times to go and man those points. To give you a figure that is around 400, as the commissioner has indicated, is actually correct, but to give you the actual number of warm vertical people is probably a little bit difficult.

The CHAIR: No, I understand that. We are going to jump around because based on your answers, you are manning two border points permanently. Is that right?

Mr STEEL: That is correct.

The CHAIR: And there are other border points in between those. How are they manned? How are they patrolled?

Mr DAWSON: The terrestrial borders, as I call them—we have one at Victoria Highway just north of Kununurra, and obviously at Eucla on the Nullarbor, but we also have to manage ports and airports as well. When I respond in terms of borders, it is not confined to the land borders. We have officers present at the Perth international airport on a daily basis.

The CHAIR: But my question was specifically on that border with the eastern states.

Mr DAWSON: Sure.

The CHAIR: There are other crossing points other than those two points. How are they being patrolled?

Mr DAWSON: Through what is known as the central lands, so in the areas within north of the goldfields—Tanami Road and things like that—we will have roving protocols. We did have static patrols at a point where I had issued directions for those nine regional areas, and for a period of time, the commonwealth had a biosecurity area. We had an obligation to also enforce and monitor people's movement in and out of the commonwealth biosecurity area as well. That as another overlay. We had officers at places like Sandfire, on the Tanami Road, right through to what is known as the Gunbarrel Highway. At the moment, we are not manning them on a permanent basis, but we do have patrols.

The CHAIR: Have you had any recent reports of any concerns about particularly the Tanami Track being used as a place of avoiding border controls?

Mr DAWSON: We take note of any information or intelligence that comes. Yes, there have been instances where we have in fact found people. I recall one instance where some people on an international tourist visa were found up in the central lands area. We apprehended them and breached them. They had come through the central desert area. We police the largest land mass jurisdiction by land in the world, so it is not particularly easy.

The CHAIR: Yes, we recognise that. But if you are finding people having breached that border, is there a risk that there are people who have breached the border that you have not found?

Mr DAWSON: Chair, with respect, I could not give a hand-on-heart guarantee to say, given the absolute sheer size of the border, that there are people that have made their way through that we have not monitored. I would not like to speculate and say that we have stopped every single vehicle; I think that would be fanciful.

The CHAIR: Yes, I think even at the border points where you do man, we have had evidence that one person at least managed to get through the border. You caught up with them in a different method later on.

Mr DAWSON: Yes, what we do have—and perhaps with your consent, I might ask Mr Blanch to expand on it—one of the matters that we have adapted is by using technology, and we had an amendment bill put through the Parliament. Perhaps, with your consent, Mr Blanch might explain what some of that technology is enabling us to do.

Mr BLANCH: Chair, two of the capabilities that we do use are the automatic numberplate recognition capability and, obviously, the electronic monitoring capability. While they do not stop

the initial breach, it enables police to backtrack and identify the whereabouts of individuals who are seeking to cross the border illegally or moving out of their quarantine zone when they have been issued a direction. We use that extensively with analytics, and we can quite accurately pinpoint the locations of where they may go once they do cross the border. I mean, we do have the advantage of 18-odd hours from the border in some locations, if not more. It gives us quite a significant lead time, and quite a lot of risk is reduced, given the distances. We have got a response time that is accurate. Victoria has a far greater challenge; two or three hours and they could be in the city. Whereas here, when they cross over, we can actually—we have bought some trailers as part of the COVID funding for the police, and they have ANPR capability. We can deploy them to some of those areas where we get intelligence that people might be crossing or using areas of the border where they are crossing over. We will deploy a camera out there.

[10.00 am]

The CHAIR: In relation to people who come in, whether they come in through the land borders, the airports or the ports, do you publish the numbers of people who come in either on a daily or weekly basis? Do you then distinguish between those who have been asked to quarantine in a hotel as opposed to those who have been asked to self-isolate and the other group who have been allowed in without any requirement to either quarantine or self-isolate? Are those figures published? Are those figures available?

Mr DAWSON: Those figures are not published. It is a classic moving feast because—if I could use the international arrivals as an example. We work and liaise very closely with the Department of Health and others. We have other national bodies, such as the Australian Border Force, and we liaise with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. But when, for example, an expat Australian individual or family boards an aircraft, whether it be in UAE, Qatar, London or wherever, they will not necessarily be known to the Australian authorities. There will be a visa process, but until the captain of the airline closes the door, we do not know how many passengers are even on the aircraft. Some of the airline operators do provide us with more particular numbers, but literally until they land on terra firma in Western Australia, we will not have any certainty on both the identities or the numbers of people there. That means that we manually process everyone. They are met by a police officer. They are also screened by the Department of Health, and there is a testing process for COVID-19 that also takes place for any international arrivals. They are all mandated to go into quarantine, what we call centre direction, into a hotel for 14 days.

I can advise the committee that it is a very tight process. No, we cannot with any certainty know exactly how many because the planes will arrive at times with a number slightly different from what was forecast, but I can assure the community through this committee that every single person arriving internationally is met and is processed. We do count them, but we do not publish them daily.

The CHAIR: But with respect, whether they arrive internationally or from interstate, once you do process them, you have a figure. I know other states publish them; South Australia publishes them, I think, on a daily basis. Is there any way you can provide the committee with information, whether it is on daily arrivals or weekly arrivals? I am not sure what your system captures, so it is hard to ask you for information that you simply do not capture. I guess what we are looking for is the number of people who arrive on a regular basis, be it daily or weekly, I think is fair—where they come from, how many of those people have been asked to go into quarantine, how many have been asked to go into self-isolation, and how many have not had any of those requirements and are actually allowed to move into our community without quarantine or self-isolation. Is that information that you can either provide today or take on notice to provide?

Mr DAWSON: I would like to take that on notice, Chair. It will not be a discrete number that I can give you. One, I do not have them on hand here and now, but I would like to, through the committee secretariat, just get it particularised—a bit like a parliamentary question, really—so that we know exactly what the committee is seeking. Because both arrivals, for instance, can be processed through what is known as a G2G pass—it is an app that we use. Others are done manually; others arrive without any application. We have a number of different systems in which we will attempt to answer as best we can, but I would also advise that it will not necessarily give you, perhaps, the detail that you asked for in one of your questions: where they came from. We know that, for instance, when we speak to people who arrive on Qatar Airways from Doha, they might have travelled from Afghanistan, India, London, wherever. We will not necessarily know where they have come from.

The CHAIR: I think we will settle for how many have come from overseas and how many have come from interstate. I think we can settle on that for now. I am not expecting you to be able to tell me that the person who took the plane in Doha had been to these following seven countries. I think that is unfair. I actually have enough understanding of the Border Force system to know that that system cannot tell me readily enough without several other steps.

Mr DAWSON: Good. Thank you. We share your observations.

The CHAIR: I am not going to ask you for that level of information, but I think it is really critically important for the public of Western Australia to get an understanding of how many people generally are coming in. I mean, can you give me a weekly average over the last few months of the number of people who have arrived in Western Australia from wherever and have been allowed to enter the community or have some form of less restricted movement that does not involve quarantine or self-isolation?

Mr DAWSON: The numbers that I will estimate—I will put a caveat on it because they are very rounded—just based on the briefings I receive and the circumstances —

We have in the order—and again, it is an estimate— of between 120 and 150 vehicles a day, I would average, coming across through Eucla. They are dominated by freight and transport, so foodstuffs. I went out there with the Premier; the first four I saw had conveyor-belt rubbers on low loaders. They will not necessarily all be of one particular company, but they are dominated by heavy transport, and food and freight. They are provided for with specific directions around them. There will also be some travellers, by small vehicles, but not many. But that is an average. In Kununurra, there would be in the order of 50 per day—perhaps sometimes lower, sometimes higher.

At Perth Airport, I might defer to Mr Steel for an average of what we would approximately process through at the airport. Can you do your best?

Mr STEEL: Look, I can. It does range. It ranges between 400 and 600 a day domestically. Some days are less; some days, more. Internationally, we have had the cap for a period of time, so we know that in a week we have had around about 525, which has been the number that we have aimed for. Of course, included in that number domestically is flight crew, and it may be the same flight crew entering every day. If that is the case, they come up in those numbers. Of course, flight crew who are Western Australian based would be those people you talk about who can enter with exemption. Cocos and Christmas Islands, for example, also come under an exemption because there is a travel bubble with them. Two days ago, I think we had 100 of those who made up the numbers who came into Western Australia. There are a number of categories of people—rig and platform workers who operate under a class exemption, providing the rig is maintained as clean, that is, that no one is quarantined, people go out to that rig—who form a large number of those numbers. When you are

actually adding up those numbers, there are a lot of people who will be coming and going many times just included in those particular numbers.

The CHAIR: From what you told me, there can be up to 800 or 900 people coming through every day on an average basis, and we have 2000 in total who have been into quarantine, so clearly, there is a big group of people who are not going into quarantine.

[10.10 am]

Mr DAWSON: There are actually greater numbers of people that are in self-isolation in their homes or in specified premises. They can range between 3 000 and 4 000 people at any time. On average, just under 2 000 are in hotel-specific quarantine. Obviously, I have had a lot of discussions with the State Disaster Council, with the Premier, Deputy Premier and others. We have had to try and maintain this balance. Based on health advice, is the place from which a person is travelling virulent with the COVID-19 pandemic and high infection rates? That is why we have put particular restrictions, dominated by Victoria and more latterly New South Wales, where I use the expression “we’re discriminating against the virus, not against the people”. So, from whence they come is really important. We have a much higher regime around international arrivals because of the dominated infection from international countries. That is why we are very strict on that, and we have had to adapt and change depending on the infection rates that the Chief Health Officer advises us and where they come from. At the same time, getting that balance between maintaining jobs, the state economy, keeping our mines, oil, gas, the freight movement going—there is a balance that we have to apply to that, because we are also very conscious that there are a lot of industries—horticulture and others—that need labour. We have to take stock of a very broad range of issues.

The CHAIR: I will get some of the members to ask questions—Don Punch.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Thank you, commissioner. Given the recent decisions by national cabinet to progressively increase the intake from overseas, as the State Emergency Coordinator, have you done some evaluation in relation to the impact of that both on police resources but also on the additional support resources that will be required in terms of maintaining hotel quarantine, and what would be the indication in terms of numbers going up from that 2 000 that is currently averaged in hotel quarantine to the sort of numbers that we would see once we reach the new cap?

Mr DAWSON: Thank you, Mr Punch. The assessment that we have made is really based on the sorts of capabilities that we need to maintain the public health. It is dominated by ensuring that with the Department of Health—I have had obviously very close dialogue with them and that continues—what sort of staffing and personnel do you need to maintain the same quality of care and protection and prevention of this infection? They responded. Dr Lawrence, in fact, personally told me that it is not, for instance, in the case of a nurse—without being disrespectful to nursing—they are specialist nurses that have infection prevention and control training. It is training that does require quite extensive qualifications, and obviously the clinicians, the doctors and others, so they cannot just simply grab a number of nurses and say, “I want you to now do that.” That is part of the resource allocation that we must measure our way through. We are confident that with the numbers that have been now graduated through, we have got to have a ready reserve for any infection surge capability, but that is one issue.

With policing, we obviously have our own logistical planning to ensure we have got sufficient police reserves. We may have to stop some other business of policing. We did that, for instance, through April–May where we suspended the random breath testing for some period of time because we had some community infections happening around March–early April. It was close personal contact with people. It was an area of policing that we did not necessarily want to stop, but we had to because we were in a state of emergency. We make those assessments on the numbers that are coming

through. As the SEC, I am confident that the state can manage them. With 1 025 coming per month¹, with close liaison with the Department of Health, the way that we are screening people, we have some advance plans of using greater technology to enable people to self-isolate more at home as opposed to hotels. But I can expand on that further.

Ms L. METTAM: Just further to that particular question, what is the maximum capacity for hotel quarantine and do we have the capacity to accept more?

Mr DAWSON: It is not a shortage of hotel beds at all. The Department of Health, who are managing the hotel quarantine process, are procuring their eighth hotel at the moment. That is one that we have worked through very carefully in the planning. I am assured that there is no shortage of rooms per se; it is about making sure we do not dilute the quality of the health and the security around those hotels. From a security element, I am satisfied, as the SEC and as the Commissioner of Police, that we have got the right levels of security around there, accepting there are thousands of people we are monitoring. But, from a health perspective, the most recent advice is that they believe they can cope with the numbers that have been, I guess, agreed to at national cabinet.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: If I can take that further, is there any sort of modelling that suggests an upper limit to the intake at which existing state-based health services or police services could be compromised across the other spectrum of services that you are required to provide?

Mr DAWSON: There is modelling. I do not have any specific numbers to quote you, but this is an ongoing piece of work in which we have assurance review processes underway in which this is daily monitored. What happens, of course, is that in some respects the numbers of people that are awaiting flights—for instance, they have arrived in Perth and they are waiting for a flight; there might be a shortage of seats on flights. The longer that they wait, the more we have to maintain. They will complete their 14 days, they will go out into the community, so there is an ebb and flow again that occurs with people coming in. It is pretty consistent now on the international arrivals. The domestic arrivals have somewhat settled in terms of some of the uncertainty that people had before.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Just switching slightly, we talked about the border patrols and the locations at Eucla and Kununurra. I noted that the agreement with the commonwealth in relation to ADF personnel to support that effort comes to an end and that those personnel are going to be withdrawn at the end of the month. What sort of impact will that have on your ability to support effective enforcement at those border points?

Mr DAWSON: The Australian Defence Force have not been at the land borders at Kununurra and Eucla for many months, but they are there presently today as I speak. They will be there in the order of about a fortnight, but they are withdrawing on 30 September. I signed a number of Defence Force assistance requests, but I received advice, both written and orally, from the Defence Force that they had other priorities. They had written similarly to my commissioner peers around the country and they have broadly taken a position that they need their Defence Force personnel to ready themselves for the bushfire season and other matters that the Chief of the Defence Force has come to.

Look, the impact of that will be we will have to have more police. We do work alongside the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, DPIRD, who also do the state quarantine for biosecurity—for insects, honey et cetera—so they are jointly with us there. I would advise the committee, though, that we will ensure that there are sufficient police numbers there. With the withdrawal of the Defence Force, we will simply have to have additional police there.

¹ Correction: It is 1 025 per week.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: So, at a time when we are being asked to take increased arrivals from overseas, Defence Force personnel are being withdrawn, in essence, from providing support services. There has been a request for additional defence personnel to support future quarantine arrangements? Has there been a reply to that at all yet?

Mr DAWSON: We have assistance. Your first questions there were about the land borders. They are providing additional personnel to assist in the monitoring and compliance. There are also requests for the Department of Health to be supported by some additional personnel to assist in contact tracing. They will need some training of those people. We also have some existing personnel to be supplemented at the monitoring of the hotel quarantine.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Those are requests, or they have been agreed?

Mr DAWSON: Both. We have some existing and we have asked for some further.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Commissioner, before I get to my two key areas I want to question you about, just picking up on that last point, is it you who makes a defence aid to the civil community—a DACC—request to the federal government, or is it the Premier who makes that request?

Mr DAWSON: No, I do.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Have you had any requests for DACC support refused?

Mr DAWSON: Yes, we have.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: When was that?

Mr DAWSON: I have signed, on recollection, probably six DACC requests. They have not all been totally refused. We have a negotiated process. We might ask for X number and get Y back, so it is not an absolute refusal but it is not a full acceptance of the numbers that we might request. I signed one this morning, for instance, but that was only for two FTE. I do not know whether they are going to do that—yes or no—but I will wait for the response.

[10.20 am]

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: It all leads me into this area now. You mentioned earlier that there could be up to 800 to 900 people a day coming into Western Australia. Ballpark figure: how many of those are not having any restrictions at all imposed on them by way of quarantine or home isolation?

Mr DAWSON: I would hazard a guess. Of the 800, there would be in the order of, I think, no more than 10, maybe 20, but they would generally be commonwealth-exempt persons such as parliamentarians and Defence Force personnel. They do comply with certain directions that I have put, but constitutionally they are regarded as exempt because they hold and operate in the office of a commonwealth official. Defence Force personnel probably dominate those followed by other commonwealth officials or parliamentarians.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Over and above those exempt people, there are others who do not have to self-isolate or quarantine are there not? For instance, those people that Mr Steel was speaking about before—the riggers on rigs and the airline personnel and the like—are not subject to self-isolation, I believe.

Mr DAWSON: They are subject to quite strict directions. Transport personnel by land have restrictions around them but they are not necessarily quarantined. They are in and out of their trucks but they must wear masks et cetera. It depends on the cohort. Mr Steel can expand on, for instance, the oil rig people. They do have to comply with quarantine terms and conditions, but they will not necessarily have to do 14 days in a hotel. Mr Steel could expand on that.

Mr STEEL: There are a number of class exemptions, Chair, that cover off on this. For example, if you are international flight crew, there is a no exemption for you. You will go to a SHICC-based hotel, so a health-based hotel. If you are air domestic flight crew and you are not a Western Australian resident, you will be required to go to an approved crew hotel. If you are a Western Australian resident flight crew who has not been in Victoria or New South Wales and has only been in one of the other states, then you will be permitted to stay at your own residence during your layover until you fly out. There are a number of these people who have perhaps what you would term “modified quarantine” but not necessarily no quarantine requirement.

The CHAIR: But those people who can stay at their own residence in that example, they are not restricted to staying home; they can go to the shops and the pub and out into the community.

Mr STEEL: It depends on which category you are talking about.

The CHAIR: The airline people, for instance.

Mr STEEL: The WA residents who have not been into one of the other states —

The CHAIR: Who have been into South Australia or Queensland, let us say.

Mr STEEL: Yes, they do not have the same restrictions as those who have been into other states.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr STEEL: That is correct.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is a risk-managed approach, is it not, based on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: If I could continue then. Based on those people who do come in that do not have those restrictions, are they all tested for COVID-19 on arrival?

Mr DAWSON: No. There is been a national arrangement, for instance, with the truck and transport sector that they are on a seven-day rolling testing regime. That has been agreed nationally to ensure that there is continued freight movement. The ordinary approach is that people who arrive, for instance, at the airport are tested on arrival and also tested on day 11. Depending on which cohort you are talking about, they might get a day 12. Certainly, most people, the vast majority, are tested on both day one or two and day 11 or 12.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Thanks, and now —

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, just on that first or second and the eleventh or twelfth—let us not argue—there is a cohort of people though who do not get a test on that first day, but then get the test on the eleventh day. What is the distinction? What is the health advice that some people get a test both on the first day and the eleventh day, and other people do not get a test on the first day but then get one on the eleventh day?

Mr DAWSON: I will get Mr Steel to answer that.

Mr STEEL: That was absolutely based on the health advice as to the epidemiology in relation to the virus. I am absolutely not an expert in this space, but the health advice is that those that are coming from the very high-risk states—it has been Victoria and New South Wales—have had the on-entry or within 48-hour testing. If they come in at an airport where we have on-entry testing available, they will be tested on entry. If not, they will be given a 48-hour order, which means that within 48 hours of entering the state, they must present at a COVID clinic or an emergency department to be tested. Everybody that comes in must then be tested on day 11. The decision to test people either on-entry as well as on day 11 is solely a health-based decision based on the epidemiology of COVID.

The CHAIR: Are we able to get that health advice?

Mr DAWSON: I would have to again take that on notice, unless you are calling the Chief Health Officer before the committee. He is the one who actually provides such advice.

The CHAIR: I would be interested. If you have that advice, can we at least put that question to you on notice and see whether you can answer it or not?

Mr DAWSON: Certainly. The health officer gives me written advice at times. I do not want to obfuscate this, but there are so many different classes of people. I will have to make sure that the specific request you are seeking answers the reasons behind it, because the advice is not completely in one document, I can assure you of that. It will move and change depending on where the people are travelling through or from and what particular cohort they are. I will do my best and take it on notice.

The CHAIR: I understand. It is based around that epidemiology Mr Steel was talking about. We will calibrate a question and then you can see what you can provide us.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I suppose it is the specific groups, from the sound of it.

The CHAIR: Yes, obviously.

Mr DAWSON: It would help me in answering, with the greatest specificity you have got.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: My next line of questioning deals with how we as a Western Australian community are going with regards to the handling of COVID-19. My observation has been that for many Western Australians, life is going as close to normal as it possibly could under the circumstances. Obviously, some Western Australians are doing it very tough because of the restrictions. But on the whole, people are getting on public transport, people are going to footy games and things are happening. Do you think we still need to be under a state of emergency?

Mr DAWSON: Yes, I do. I share your observation that Western Australians are in a community setting where I have to, in my role, guard against apathy. I talk to my family and colleagues, both professionally and privately, who live in Victoria; it is a totally different environment, and the community attitude and response is markedly different within Australia itself. That is the first word of caution I would respond to you on. But in answer to your question: do we need to remain in a state of emergency? Yes. I firmly say yes because of the international arrivals alone. The Emergency Management Act is the only vehicle by which I can, as the SEC, put in place, in concert with the provisions of the Public Health Act, which the Chief Health Officer has a statutory role—but the EMA provides the state with certainty and surety around putting quarantine measures, compliance checking by police and other authorities, and until and unless we put such safeguards in place, we have to assume that anyone arriving internationally has COVID-19. I say that with factual concerns. For instance, with a flight that came from Dubai in July, we recorded 20 infected passengers on that single flight. If they were able to move about in the community, we know from the Victorian experience that it does not take much for this type of virus to then rapidly spread throughout the community.

My answer is yes. So long as we have infected persons entering Western Australia particularly from overseas, as we see the Australian context getting under control, I think we will be able to get further advice as to whether we can change some of these emergency provisions around. So long as the international situation—I am monitoring very closely the UK, for instance. We have a very strong travel and trade relation with the UK. We would have to have a state of emergency if we are going to allow people to arrive here from the UK.

[10.30 am]

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: I think you have answered my question, and that is that the restrictions that are currently in place, you are saying they can only exist under a state of emergency—they cannot exist without a state of emergency?

Mr DAWSON: That is correct.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Who has the ultimate say for determining what restrictions are imposed or lifted, and what process is gone through to reach those decisions?

Mr DAWSON: I do. Under the Emergency Management Act, I am the actual final decision-maker, but I would not say that I do that without taking a host of advice. I obviously advise the State Disaster Council, chaired by the Premier. I have lots of dialogue, clearly, with the Chief Health Officer. I take his advice very closely, because it is a public health matter and he is a public health expert. He also caucuses with the AHPPC as the principal national health body. By way of example of some of my earlier responses, I have also got to take into account information from Treasury officials, from the private sector and from industry to ensure that it is not just a sole health focus but we have a whole-of-community focus. I get lots of information from the community as well.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: With regard to you being the ultimate decision-maker on the restrictions imposed, are you resourced adequately to achieve your restrictions?

Mr DAWSON: Yes. We have now just passed six months. There is an assurance review that the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and I, and others, are discussing to ensure that with our own health check—this is not necessarily marking your own homework—but there are also some overlays that give me further information. The state Auditor General, for instance, is doing a series of reviews and audits. We have had the commonwealth, through Ms Jane Halton, do a review in terms of hotel quarantine. In terms of resourcing, I have been in close dialogue with the government in terms of Western Australia police, and I am confident that I am being listened to.

The CHAIR: Can I just add there: you are the ultimate decision-maker in relation to these decisions that we are talking about.

Mr DAWSON: Yes, but I do it with a broad consultative base.

The CHAIR: Of course, but you—not you personally, but the person who fills your position is the ultimate decision-maker.

Mr DAWSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: In many ways you are able to make decisions irrespective of whether the Premier of the day, the government of the day or the Parliament agree or not, because you are the ultimate decision-maker. In relation to Premiers, cabinet and Parliament, there is an oversight process; that is, Parliament itself and an election process—people are accountable. Is there a gap in our system of oversight in relation to that decision-making power that you or your office holds as an absolute decision-making power?

Mr DAWSON: As I have presently experienced over the last six months, there is no rule book over the COVID-19 pandemic—every nation in the world is struggling with this. But I opened my remarks this morning by stating that in the statutory framework and all the policies, planning and processes that flow with committees, we have independence within the State Emergency Management Committee, for instance, with an independent chair and members, I think the very process we are taking part in this morning is such an oversight process that I think is healthy. I accept that while there is a decision-making process and I sign emergency powers, I am very conscious that there needs to be a separation of powers between the executive arm of government and the operational areas, but not without question, because these are extraordinary times. I have responded to some

media questions and said that I do not want to live in a police state, because I am a citizen and I have got family here as well. I accept the absolute challenge between people who have lost their jobs—sadly, nine people have died in Western Australia—and there is a reality to this, about employment, job opportunities and restrictions of movement. I have received over 1 000 complaints by way of writing from people who feel aggrieved at decisions that have been made. We are very conscious and very alive to the issue that we cannot simply—I cannot as an individual—make decisions with impunity, so I welcome this process. I think it is actually good for our democracy.

The CHAIR: I understand that, and take this as a comment, but I have been challenged personally as to how to utilise this committee's process—not how to utilise it but when to utilise it, because the last thing you needed was being hauled before parliamentary committees in March, April, May. But, at the same time, you do hold, effectively, ultimate power in some of this decision-making. I think the public would expect scrutiny, and I am glad that you are open to that sort of scrutiny, and you are here today obviously. Perhaps one of the things we can take away from this is that in periods of states of emergency that go on for an extended period of time, perhaps we might need a more formalised mechanism of triggering these sorts of hearings—perhaps a monthly or quarterly attendance. That is something we can all take away and think about.

Ms L. METTAM: Just further to the information that is provided to the public, and the chair did refer to the entrants into other states and the publishing of that material. Why in WA have you stopped releasing some of that information on the detail of entrants into this state? I understand it was available before.

Mr DAWSON: I am happy to respond, certainly with some notice in writing for any particular matters. I have not made a decision to suspend or withhold any particular data. We get lots of requests. I spent half of my working day two days ago responding to very open FOI requests. I did, in fact, muse and contemplate, "Well, I'm actually in the middle of a state of emergency but I'm spending four hours responding to some FOI requests and I have a whole bunch more"! I did not think that was the best use of my time. I am not at all complaining and saying I should not be subject to the FOI act, but we have to balance it out. My broad response is we have taken some questions on notice. We will do our very best to provide the data around the numbers. It is not the case that I have wilfully said to our people, "Collect data as you will." Every single person coming through has their own individual story. There have been some very sad, compassionate cases, and obviously there is some media reporting on those. My broad response to you is we take as much care as possible to make sure we do not just do it by rote and say, "Just come through." We have to make individual assessments, because we are conscious that this affects people's lives and livelihoods, and contact with loved ones. Sadly, there are many people who have had to attend for illness, for funerals and whatever. We will provide as many statistics as we reasonably can, but for the time we are still operating in a state of emergency.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I think there is a comment, in terms of being open to that scrutiny, we do have processes for that. There is an obligation on those undertaking the scrutiny to do it in a judicious manner and not in a way that starts to derail the actual response effort. It is a comment more than a question.

Mr DAWSON: I could say, in your invitation in writing to me, lessons learnt, if we could integrate our systems—I know that is not the first time a committee would have ever heard that—I could flick a switch and give you that. But we work with about 150 agencies and for me to say, "How many people did you actually stop for biosecurity quarantine at this particular point?", I just have to manually do a lot of that. This is not, again, to try and say it is all too hard. We will have numbers that we can provide you, but I would not be in any way certain they will be complete because we

have these silos of incidents, as I call them. If we had one integrated system, it would make everyone's job a lot easier.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Nirvana!

Ms L. METTAM: Another question: you referred to the advance plans for isolation at home. Can you tell me a little more about this in terms of the numbers? Are we talking about international arrivals, and how is this managed?

[10.40 am]

Mr DAWSON: I will let Mr Steel expand more because he deals with it on a daily basis. On advice from the Chief Health Officer, we have procedures by which we make assessments. I can leave the committee with perhaps a process map, which actually shows you how, in fact, on a macro level, some of these directions are applied. We have to, for instance, question people: "If you want to self-isolate at home, how many people live there? Do you have separate kitchen, separate toilets, separate sleeping areas?" Because there is no utility in saying, "I live in North Perth, I have a two-bedroom house and there are six people living there, and I want to self-isolate." That is going to be pretty problematic. We would then, in that sort of scenario, say that is not suitable based on the advice we have got from Health. If, though, people say, "I'm prepared to hire a room at a hotel for a while, I'd rather do that because I want to be able to self-isolate in that." That does occur, and employer groups do that. Some employer groups have been very proactive, I think sensibly, with their workforce, by basically sequestering a whole resort. One company in particular is very agile in that, and they thought ahead and they got themselves a resort to their own company needs and their workforce was able to recreate, go about their business and go back and forward to mine sites, for instance.

Ms L. METTAM: So the individual or the company has to prove that they are able to do that responsibly?

Mr DAWSON: To provide quarantine safety, basically. We cannot permit—again, it is based on Health advice—people to simply arrive and say, "I live at a particular home and I can go there." It may not be suitable, because if there are schoolchildren moving in and out of the home, going back and forth to school and they are sharing the same kitchen and the same ablutions, then we cannot have any certainty that it is not going to transmit, if they are infectious, to children moving and out and going back and forth.

Ms L. METTAM: What sort of numbers are we looking at with internationals and interstate?

Mr DAWSON: That will probably be embodied in the question I took on notice, but we have got, as I say, around about 2 000 to 3 000 people at least who are routinely self-isolating in private premises.

Ms L. METTAM: Just another question: If the High Court in November rules that the border is unconstitutional, what is the plan B? How will the movement of people into WA be controlled? What is the alternative?

Mr DAWSON: I would like to add to that, but I am a defendant in that matter. I am the second respondent, so I think, on advice, best if I do not comment given there is a defence running at the moment.

The CHAIR: Can we focus for a while on the G2G? I think the second-last question from the member for Vasse alluded to that. Obviously that is a very resource-intensive process for police. Are there any guidelines that are issued to police who are processing the G2G passes? I do not want to speak for other members, but we compare notes and it has lightened off in the last couple of weeks, which

probably goes to show you are catching up, but we have been inundated with concerns about timeliness of processing, inconsistency in processing and just simply the lack of awareness in multiple processing where you put in some information, you are asked for more information, you put more information in and then you are told to submit the information you originally submitted. Can you comment on that more broadly before we start asking some more specific questions around the G2G PASS?

Mr DAWSON: I will certainly, with your consent, ask Mr Steel to expand on what I initially responded to. The G2G was an initiative that Western Australia police worked with a small Western Australian company. The example I used before with our intrastate borders, where we have done vehicle checkpoints on 850 000 vehicles, a lot of that was facilitated by people downloading that app and having a QR code. What was happening, and what in fact happens in almost every other Australian jurisdiction, is that they are stopping vehicles for longer periods at border points; they are taking much longer to process through their airports. For those who have the QR code, our officers—who are all issued with smartphones—can process them much quicker. That is on an efficiency space. The qualitative assessment is detailed, and I will let Mr Steel talk you through how that process occurs. But I would advise the committee that the use of smart technology has greatly and rapidly allowed much faster processing—despite the complaints. I know there are complaints, but they are not necessarily about the technological efficiency, it is more about, “Why wasn’t my application received?” Mr Steel will do his best to explain how that process occurs.

Mr STEEL: Thank you, commissioner. The reality is that before this pandemic, this system did not exist. We had no way of controlling people coming into the state; we had never had a need for that before, so we have actually had to build this on the run. You have got to expect that when you have a process that you are building, while the engine is running at 10 000 revs, you are going to make some mistakes. I have no doubt that there have been people who have applied multiple times. We started with a paper-based system, and that became almost overwhelming. People had to submit their request via an email, handwritten form, and there were thousands upon thousands of requests, so the resource element behind that was such that we simply could not keep up with or cope with the volume that was coming through. Then we were trying to read people’s handwriting; we were trying to do those sorts of things. G2G NOW was our first effort at doing that. G2G NOW was largely based, originally, around the intrastate borders —

Mr DAWSON: The G2G PASS.

Mr STEEL: Sorry, the G2G PASS was largely based around the intrastate borders and managing the free flow of people who had a legitimate reason to cross. We quickly adapted that to deal with the state borders as that came on, and we had to develop again new procedures in accordance with the directions, which have also changed over time. For example, the entry criteria currently from Victoria or New South Wales is different to the entry criteria from the other states or jurisdictions within Australia. Again, people are always learning and we are continually changing. That is why there would be a perception that the decisions have not always been the same, because someone coming from Victoria will be treated somewhat differently to someone who is coming from New South Wales. That is in accordance with the directions. Your category for entry, if you are a FIFO worker from Queensland, for example, you will qualify as a category for exemption. If you are a FIFO worker in Victoria or New South Wales currently, you will not. I suggest that that may well be part of that process.

Your question about are there procedures or guidelines—absolutely, there are a lot of people who are processing these applications. We have gone from a backlog of around 5 000 applications down to a backlog of under 2 000, so the timeliness factors are absolutely improving, and there is always

a focus on seeing who is coming in at the shortest period of time so that people are approved prior to them coming in. But do not forget people can still apply by paper and there are some people who do not apply before they get here, as they are required to do, and simply turn up at the airport and have to be processed. The G2G process has evolved. The amount of information that is required is continually monitored and the type of information that you are talking about, where people are asking for “evidence of” will be dependent not only on the category under which they are entering—so that is why it can vary—but in some instances at the moment, as the directions sit, from the jurisdiction or the hotspot which they are entering from. Does that explain that?

The CHAIR: It does. It shows that it is a moving feast and it is difficult for you. I guess the two questions I have are: What is the average resourcing that you dedicate to this G2G process itself? How many sworn officers and how many non-sworn staff are generally involved in this? Secondly, is there a magic time line that staff are meant to aim at? Should these passes be processed within a 48-hour time frame or a 72-hour time frame or what is the anticipated processing time of an average application?

Mr STEEL: Currently, we have 20 police staff members. We have approximately 40 police officers who are largely dedicated to this particular function. We originally set ourselves an aim of trying to make sure that everything was processed within 72 hours, but the reality is we have no control over the number of applications that are coming in. I said before that the numbers can vary quite significantly in terms of those that actually arrive. That does not tell you how many actually apply. There are a hell of a lot more that actually apply. We will always surge to try and meet the needs, and we prioritise that on those that are coming in. Whilst we ask people to apply in advance, there will be those that apply when they get to the airport; there will be those that apply within 24 hours. We need to process them before they come in so that they actually know that they are allowed to or not allowed to come in. That will push back the time frames at different times. There will be times when people are waiting longer than the 72 hours, which was always our target but it has never been a service delivery standard that we have set for ourselves because it is not really possible for us to —

The CHAIR: I understand that.

[10.50 am]

Mr DAWSON: Chair, can I just expand? Some of these might be regarded as red herrings but they are not. When people apply, for instance, on compassionate grounds and say, “Look, I need to attend a funeral”, we have to particularise it and ask if they are a lineal relative or just a close friend or are there are other reasons. For us to accept someone’s application who is saying that they need to attend WA to attend a funeral, we just cannot process it—“Oh, well, then, it’s a funeral—tick. You can come in.” We have had breaches where people have lied. Not everyone tells the truth—the vast majority do. But we have to be realistic about it and accept that if a person—and they do commit offences and people have in fact been imprisoned, as we know, for breaches. We have to treat these carefully. I am also conscious that there are many people who have compassionate grounds. If they say, for instance, “My child has special needs”, is it particularised with a letter from a medical practitioner or do you just put that in your application and say, “My child has special needs”? If we were to accept that, I think we would be somewhat derelict in that processing. We are not lacking in compassion, but it does require quite detailed examination. While we have 60 FTE processing at the moment, we are trying to cope with it. I have found that whenever there is a change in directions, either restricting or unrestricting, that invites a whole surge of people who say, “Now I’m coming in.” We have just got to balance that as much as we can.

The CHAIR: I recognise it. It is something that you have not had to address beforehand. One classic example that I have had that is still galling and impossible to explain away, is of a couple returning from New South Wales—before the latest directions around New South Wales, of course. Both had permission on their G2G to self-isolate at home. They arrived on separate flights because of the lack of availability to book flights. The wife of the couple was sent home to isolate. The very next day the husband was sent to quarantine in a hotel for two weeks and pay for it. It is impossible to explain those sorts of anomalies in a logical manner to people, which is why I ask: there are police officers making these decisions, so why is there such an inconsistency?

Mr STEEL: I was just going to say in relation that one, and I know that this is a technical point, but in terms of suitable premises, if there is somebody already isolating at that premises, then it is not a suitable premises notwithstanding where they have come from, but in accordance with the direction. So you take that situation where they have come from the same location, I take your point. But as far as the directions are actually written, that is technically the correct decision.

The CHAIR: If they had managed to get a flight together —

Mr STEEL: If they had managed to get a flight together, they would have been able to —

The CHAIR: — they would have been able to go —

Mr STEEL: — because they were both under the same quarantine period.

The CHAIR: You can understand then why the public, when they are confronted with these examples—I understand that there are isolated examples—pull their hair out. No offence! We are confronted with those things on a regular basis.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Just on that example. When the husband would have said, “Look, this is silly.” Why would it not have gone up the chain of command for somebody to step in and say, “Yes, you’re right. This is silly. We will personally drive you to your home and your wife and you can self-isolate.” Why did that not happen?

Mr STEEL: I do not know that particular circumstance. I was pointing out the fact that sometimes these things are because of the actual directions, which require us to make a decision.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: I absolutely get that, Deputy Commissioner.

Mr STEEL: I do not know if that was actually raised with the supervisor. Again, it is a little bit hard for me to speculate in relation to that particular instance.

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Understood.

Mr DAWSON: Sorry to cut across. There is some flexibility that can be made and some broader exemptions and decisions can be made up there. But we will take on notice any such instances because, again, we are not endeavouring to frustrate people.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Commissioner, just to refresh my memory, how many passes would be processed on a weekly basis, for example?

Mr STEEL: I do not have that those figures with me, but we have done the figures. It is over 1 700 a week who are actually processed.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: And have —

The CHAIR: Can we get that on notice? Can we get some information on a week by week basis over the period that you started processing them? I think that will build the picture of the stress that your 60 staff are under.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The point I was making though, Chair, was just in that number, the vast majority would be processed without a problem and in terms of the system actually responding and people getting a response.

Mr DAWSON: Broadly speaking, while we accept that there are errors that are made and at times it is back and forward in terms of sufficient or insufficient information, we will endeavour to provide you with the most complete answer we can, accepting that they are not all in the same system. We will have to work our way through that.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I do not want to add to the workload. It was really an observation about the number of passes that go through and people are reasonably satisfied with the outcome, whether it is approved or not approved, that the system has actually worked effectively. I am sure we could all find the odd one or two that really stand out and you really scratch your head about it.

The CHAIR: Yes, but obviously one of the things that is becoming clear from this hearing is that although the front end—the public-facing end—is one pass, the processes that lead to that pass have multiple pathways and they are coming in from different places using different mechanisms, systems and time frames. The person who has arrived at the airport without a pass is on a different time frame to someone who has applied before they leave.

Mr DAWSON: Part of that constraint is that, and you may have picked it up in some of the media reporting, there are a whole bunch of different ways in which people can arrive by various modes of transport—be it by land, maritime or air. There is no law presently that requires people on entry to comply with a particular prescribed form of doing it. If this was to be going for a long period of time, and maybe that is in your third question that you put to me in the invitation, a matter that we would look at and say, “Should there be only one way of doing that?” That might invite some inflexibility but it would at least standardise the way in which you do it, so when you apply for a passport, it is in a prescribed manner. At the moment, because we have been doing this in a dynamic environment and an ever-changing one, the conditions are changing.

We are looking at and close to completing a further development in the G2G application process where we may be able to, by consent with an individual who is arriving, utilise the technology to geocode them through their smart device at their home if it is in the right circumstances. Again it is a consent-based model, which we would work through very carefully. The would obviate the need for someone who, for instance, if they have a suitable premises, to stay at home rather than be in a hotel. We are on the cusp of deploying that sort of app. That would be an option which I think would take away some of the need for people to spend 14 days in a hotel environment. More people may be able to self-isolate in their own premises and we can have some certainty. We have police officers going around door knocking and making sure that people are physically there. We can do it technologically if people are willing to say, “Yes, I’m happy to download this app on my smartphone.” If you want to check where they are, they take an image and say, “This is where I am.” That is one way of not disrupting people’s lives and also not taking police resources away from physically attending addresses.

The CHAIR: This takes us to “What do we do from here on in?” We are here now and we have no end date in sight. You have been very clear: there is likely to be a state of emergency at least until the international border is lifted because it is your mechanism of controlling who comes in and where they go, so we recognise that. In relation to the interstate border, is it you who ultimately determines when that interstate border is lifted and to whom it might be lifted to if it is done in stages?

Mr DAWSON: Ultimately, I would be a signatory to a direction to either revoke an existing direction, which in case there are ones now, or indeed there maybe another mechanism. As I am part of a litigation process, there may be another mechanism that the High Court might have.

[11.00 am]

The CHAIR: Let us ignore that one.

Mr DAWSON: Put that to one side. If there is to be a revocation of the existing national border controls that WA have, ultimately, yes, that would be me as the individual. Again, as I have stressed, I have to, by law, give advice and receive advice. I do that not just with the Chief Health Officer but obviously in dialogue through the State Disaster Council, industry and community. Again, I just wanted to put that qualification on that decision-making process that I have got to take a whole broad range of information before I come to a deliberative decision and go, “Well, this is what I think we need to do.”

The CHAIR: Are you able to provide us with any insight into what facts or circumstances need to exist before that border, be it the hard border, the strong border—the border between Western Australia and the rest of Australia—can be lifted? Just so I can conclude my question, there is a suggestion that currently there is a formulation of 28 days without community spread across any or all of the other states. Is that still the active determining factor?

Mr DAWSON: That is the principal advice that the Chief Health Officer is providing me, where he has expressly stated that the epidemiology under public health—again, this is a matter that is not necessarily just he himself—but as the principal person with responsibility for managing the biohazards has advised me and others that there must be two clear 14-day periods. The nature of this virus is that there can be, for instance, a PCR test taken on day one, two, three or four which may not present as positive. We have in the state been consistently getting people who have been tested on day one or two and not showing an infection, but on day eight or nine or thereafter, and day 11 test will then show that they have got it. That is why the certainty that Dr Robertson is advising us is that you need two clear 14-day periods of no community transmission, accepting that we have got as of today six active cases in Western Australia. They will be people who have arrived from international destinations. Yes, we do not have the community transmission here since April, but it is that management of two 14-day periods that the health advice is principally about.

The CHAIR: Can that be applied to individual states or territories or must it be for all other states and territories?

Mr DAWSON: I think that would be a matter that I would defer to the Chief Health Officer, with respect.

The CHAIR: But the decision has to be yours, does it not?

Mr DAWSON: Yes, but in terms of the public health advice, I would have to take stock and do what the Chief Health Officer advises.

The CHAIR: What is the current advice? Is the current advice from the Chief Medical Officer that it has to be every other state and territory?

Mr DAWSON: He is advising me that two clear 14-day periods with no community transmission is the best possible scenario. He has advised me that he wants to review that in a fortnight’s time, so we are coming up to that. The last advice he gave me was on 14 September in which he has stated we need to review that process again. I think that tells me on or around 28 September, we will be having a further review of that particular medical advice.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The stakes are very high on this, are they not?

The CHAIR: Just let me finish this.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The stakes are very high —

The CHAIR: No, I am sorry—I am chairing this meeting. I am very accommodating, but I am halfway through a question —

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I know you are.

The CHAIR: You cannot intervene.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I know you are, but I do note that other members frequently interrupt on my questions.

The CHAIR: Can I just finish off on that. So on 28 September you have been advised that you will receive refreshed advice from the Chief Medical Officer in relation to this issue?

Mr DAWSON: This is actually a daily conversation, pretty well.

The CHAIR: Right, okay.

Mr DAWSON: But he has advised me that he wanted to review in two weeks' time his most recent advice. I accept that he is going to be receiving, clearly, clinical and health information that I will not have. He is obviously party to this nationally. On the present, while we speak pretty well on a daily basis, our next point of review is on or around 28 September.

The CHAIR: That is fair enough, so you have got a process there in place, which is good because you need to review these things. This advice, is it publicly communicated, is it made public in any way or is it simply private advice from the Chief Medical Officer to you?

Mr DAWSON: Look, he provides it both orally and at times in writing, so I have got regular pieces of advice from him. I do not publish it.

The CHAIR: I understand that, but is there any reason why this cannot be published?

Mr DAWSON: Certainly I am happy to take a request from you. I would certainly discuss that with him, but I am in receipt of some written advice.

The CHAIR: Because, you can understand, from a public decision-making point of view, and going back to that point that we made before, whether you are a Premier, a minister or even a bureaucrat in the general course of events, there are parliamentary processes to get this information. In this particular case, there is not that ability to seek that information and make it public. Would it not be even more important that this sort of information is made public as a matter of course just to keep faith and confidence?

Mr DAWSON: I do not have any personal difficulty in taking that request. I would obviously want to consult with him to make sure there is no matter that should not be preventing it, because it is of public interest. I am happy to accommodate a request from the committee, but I would ask that I obviously need to consult with the Chief Health Officer to ensure that there is no public interest immunity claim over it or something like that.

The CHAIR: Excellent, so we will put that to you on notice so it is a formal request and you can respond in that way. I am really grateful that you acknowledge that that sort of information is of public interest. Not all information that is of public interest can be published—we recognise that—but that is a good starting point, I think. Did you have any other questions?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I had a question, Chair.

In the evidence you have given so far, there is complexity to the interpretation of virtually every aspect of the response. In regard to this issue about at what point are we in a position to open

borders, there is a complexity associated with the High Court issues that are afoot and there is a complexity in terms of the risk in getting that view correct. We see that in terms of what has happened in Victoria; we have seen it in terms of what is happening overseas with the UK now and the rapid rate at which spread can occur. One of the things that we talk about is lockdowns, lockdowns, lockdowns and its impact on people. But lockdowns are there to manage the spread of a virus, given that the impact of community transmission within the community is a very rapid return to some sort of increased restriction. I guess in the interpretation of that information and advice that comes from the Chief Medical Officer, there is a very in-depth process at the State Emergency Council level and in the advice that you seek from others in terms of how that eventually results in a determination or a way forward. Would that be a reasonable sort of analysis?

Mr DAWSON: Mr Punch, I think I would largely agree, strongly, that this is a very complex set of circumstances that we find ourselves in within this state of emergency. I would refer back to Mr L'Estrange's comments that the Western Australian community is largely normalised in the state that we are now in. I, amongst others, have travelled about within the regions and seen that the economy—and I am getting data on that as well—the employment prospects we have seen, the Reserve Bank of Australia makes some strong statements about it. There is little doubt that the Western Australian community is very well placed in terms of, for instance, schooling. We have seen, particularly in Victoria, they have largely been homeschooled all year, yet our community has been able to operate in an environment which I would largely, collectively say is a credit to all Western Australians and those authorities that are doing it, because we have not had community transmission since 12 April. Even then, we have been able to sustain, really, largely our way of life, and what I might term the “exquisite balance” is between how do you actually maintain public confidence and are able to operate as much as we can, accepting that there are frustrations and real issues with people who say, “I can't come home.” I have got family overseas that have expressly said that to me myself. This impacts on everyone, so we have to get this balance right. That is what the state has been balancing, accepting that it is a dynamic changing environment. But the way we are presently situated in a complex environment we are, I guess, in a state of emergency but necessarily so because of what is happening outside of WA.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: For very good reasons.

[11.10 am]

Mr S.K. L'ESTRANGE: Commissioner, you have touched on this a couple of times. I just want to clarify, moving into summer bushfires is always a serious concern for Western Australians. You alluded to earlier the fact that resourcing issues exist. You have got DACC requests that have been going out—some have not been approved; some have. How are you resourced for mid-December for a serious bushfire season with your policing resources whilst you maintain your role as the State Emergency Coordinator?

Mr DAWSON: Clearly, the hazard management agency in the case that you have cited is the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, so we work closely with that department and particularly with Commissioner Darren Klemm. While he bears, and willingly does so, primary responsibility for mitigation and for prevention and obviously for combating bushfires, he works very closely with police and others, particularly local government, and we have obviously, under the emergency framework, the various district and local emergency management committees and frameworks. We are presently in a better position than we once were. I was able to secure from government an extra 150 police. That was announced in April. They are presently in training. We are obviously working our way through a budget process and I have got to wait like everyone else on that announcement, but I am in a position where we had to suspend some of our training in the

hurly-burly of April, May and June, but that training is now back on track. In fact, we had to remove some recruits out of the Police Academy training. I think we are now at a state, again, dependent on how we continue to track with the pandemic side, where, as the police officers take just over six months to graduate out of the Police Academy, we will be better positioned in April–May next year once those officers start to graduate out. We have also secured some funding to enable us to have some greater surge capacity. I am not presently concerned based on the risks that have been put forward by the Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner. Yes, we know it is a high-risk period of the year, but we have presently got good plans around that, unless Mr Blanch, who has that under his portfolio, has got anything further to add?

Mr BLANCH: I would probably say two things. One is that Operation Tide has moved out under separate premises, so we have freed up our emergency operations space to manage any other emergency, whether it be a bushfire or a cyclone. Those resources are always available to surge. I would say as a result of the pandemic itself and our better arrangements at sharing information with other areas—we have held more regular state emergency coordination groups—there is actually better intergovernmental arrangements in sharing information and working together in an emergency environment. They have actually learnt a lot. The other departments have learnt a significant amount from the emergency agencies, so I think we are even better prepared in that sense.

Mr DAWSON: Could I take the opportunity, Chair and member, on that theme? We had to be quite adaptive in the very early stages of the pandemic to ensure that we did not compromise on our business as usual, because policing has to go on, despite crime dropping, mainly because we have been stopping a lot of drugs coming in with the hard borders. We, for instance, adapted the Optus Stadium facility to use as a forward command area, because it was not being used for footy and so we were able to work very closely with the venue operators and use that. But it is a temporary facility. We have now secured some other additional area that was formerly in the Department of Communities down at Plain Street, so that is where Mr Steel and Op Tide people are moving in.

To take the opportunity on your closing question “lessons learnt”, there is a need for the state to have an enduring state disaster control and command centre. We have one that is an adapted gymnasium at Maylands, which is a very effective one which we set up during CHOGM in 2011, but I have been advocating a need for an enduring state disaster command and control centre, or crisis centre. That should not be police-centric. This should be a state asset and all the response agencies should have permanence, so it is running warm. I know from your defence background, it will be something very similar to what you are familiar with, with the joint command capabilities. That is one that I am putting forward to government and saying that this is an asset that I believe would be good for Western Australia. You should not be procuring temporary premises for something that we do not know how long will go, and there will be many hazards that we will have to challenge in the years ahead.

Ms L. METTAM: Commissioner, how many incidents have you personally intervened on in relation to quarantine or isolation? How many matters do you think so far since March?

Mr DAWSON: I infrequently get them. I got one yesterday. I simply delegated it straightaway. From time to time, individual cases will be brought to me. The director general of Health forwarded me one yesterday for my information, but I have simply delegated that to someone else. Occasionally, they slip through the emails. I do not personally get involved in decision-making as to—is your question about whether a person is exempt or whether they get a quarantine pass, so to speak?

Ms L. METTAM: To do with isolation or quarantine. Have you personally become involved in any particular —

Mr DAWSON: I have been asked on several occasions, and there are matters—there were some compassionate ones, and one that got a bit of media that I was asked for my view on. So there have been maybe a dozen that have come to my desk, but, again, I do not get personally involved. I have got a delegation schedule where officers do it, from deputy commissioner down. There is a delegation schedule, so it may be an inspector that does it, but I do not personally get involved. I do not have time, to be blunt.

Ms L. METTAM: Right. About a dozen and you have not been personally involved in any of them; you have delegated?

Mr DAWSON: People have asked me questions and I have said, “Look, send the process through and I’ll send it to one of my delegates.”

Ms L. METTAM: I am not sure if you can answer this question, but since March it would be good to get an understanding of how many Western Australians are currently wanting to return to this state. There seems to be quite a number from overseas and interstate as well. Do you have an idea of what the population may be now compared to March, or what sort of number we are looking at in terms of those wanting to come back to WA at the moment?

Mr DAWSON: We have asked that question. The difficulty is that DFAT—the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade—and Border Force cannot give me exact numbers. They have got an approximation of how many thousands of Australians who either are permanent or have residency are living overseas, but how many expressly want to return I cannot here and now tell you, unless one of my colleagues has better numbers?

Mr STEEL: Internationally, boss, you are exactly right. In terms of the interstate question, the reality is that your state of residence is not a category for entry to Western Australia. There is no category for returning Western Australian residents, so that is not something that we have ever captured or looked at. Every application is assessed on its merits, and every application is different.

Ms L. METTAM: I asked before the question about why there has been a shift away from releasing or stopping the release of details regarding the entrants that are coming into WA. Was this a direction that you were given to not provide that information?

[11.20 am]

Mr DAWSON: No, not at all. My director of media communications is in the room; he is also by statute the state emergency public information coordinator, so that has had to set up the 13 COVID line, the ICC, which is a cohort of people that take all the email requests on all these sorts of types of queries. They do a mountain of work. As I said, there have been 90 million views on the website. I have not specifically, one, been given any direction by government to say, “Don’t release stats.” I have certainly received quite a number of media inquiries. Now, the conversation I have had with Mr Gretton was, “Look, I do not have time to do a league ladder on how many people are coming through per day”, because we just have to manage and evaluate the merit of the applications as opposed to counting. Now, if our systems are smart enough, I have no difficulty in releasing them. And we have got some questions on notice and we will do our very best to give it to you, but it has not been because we do not want numbers to go out. We have simply been concentrating on the higher priority matters.

The CHAIR: You have been doing this for six months now. We have got 400 to 500 police effectively full-time in COVID response. We accept that is part of policing; an emergency happens and police are involved in that. From time to time, you surge up beyond those numbers. In March–April you pulled booze buses, drug buses, partly though for health reasons. What elements of policing are

under strain as a result of this new normal of having 400 or 500 officers who were otherwise doing other duties, now doing those duties because they cannot do everything?

Mr DAWSON: There is a bit of serendipity here, because one of the unintended outcomes of making early decisions about emergency directions, particularly the one I made on 5 April about closing the borders, we know that illicit drugs, particularly methamphetamine, is a major driver of crime. We have known that for quite a period of time over 20-year assessments of detainees at the Perth watch house that the rate of detection and urinalysis means that those persons who are in custody for violent offences or theft or burglaries are now approaching 70 per cent, so seven out of 10 detainees have meth in their system. One of the benefits, and it was unintended, of putting in much stricter border control is that less drugs have come in. That has the result—and this has been a bit of revelation for us—that on a five-year rolling average, over the last quarter we are 60 per cent down on home burglaries and we are just under 50 per cent down on car theft. This is quite demonstrable over the last three to six months. That has actually given us opportunities, not to do as much investigative and response work because crime has gone down.

You will be unsurprised that there is now current reporting about assaults, for instance, in Northbridge. In fact, they are about 20 per cent down in our year-to-year stats in terms of the numbers of assaults. While we had very strict directions over movement of people, unsurprisingly for me and many other police, there were very little assaults reported in our entertainment areas because people were not allowed to drink and move about as they are now. That just comes with policing. My answer to you is: yes, we have 400 to 500 officers dedicated to it, but we have been in this very different state of emergency where crime has actually gone down. That has been a surprise to me and many other people.

The CHAIR: But as we roll out of it, your police are still there doing COVID. We are not in the lockdown stage any more. Some crimes have gone down, but violent crime has continued to spike up.

Mr DAWSON: No, it has not, with respect.

The CHAIR: Irrespective of that, so you do not need more police? You cannot use more police?

Mr DAWSON: No, no; we can, and we are using them to actually pursue organised criminals even more. We have been using, I think, an opportunity where we have intelligence on high-level drug traffickers and we have been doing a lot of work in this opportunity to interdict more organised criminals. While we cannot sheet home all of the downturn in crime to just the border control, that does have and has had a big impact. We have also been tasking particular police tactical efforts in targeting those crimes we know have an enduring impact on the community. I expect the crime rates will rise as we normalise back into a normal pattern of society. What we want to do is try and continue to restrict the flow of drugs into the state, because that has quite a, to use the term, “deleterious impact” on the whole of the community.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Commissioner, just to confirm that I did hear you correctly that there has not been a spike in violent crime?

Mr DAWSON: No, the most recent stats I looked at this morning are that on a year-to-year basis and on a five-year basis crime has gone down in almost every single category except for family and domestic violence, where there has been in the order of 10 to 12 per cent increase, and we are doing some analysis on that. That has been consistent across Australia, indeed, internationally. If more people are at home and they are confined to their homes and it is not a particularly safe home environment, then it is a case that we are receiving more reports of family and domestic violence. That is an area that we are paying particular attention to.

The CHAIR: These are the stats that have not been published yet, obviously?

Mr DAWSON: No, they are openly available on our website.

The CHAIR: Only to 30 June?

Mr DAWSON: Yes. We will have another quarter one coming out I think the end of this month.

The CHAIR: We will not get into a debate on it, because the 30 June figures show something slightly different—the published stats. You must have more immediate stats.

Mr DAWSON: I have ones I have got from this morning, yes.

The CHAIR: We can carry on but we have got to go to Parliament. We are not allowed to meet during parliamentary sitting times. Is there anything you wanted to tell us that you have not had the opportunity to tell us today?

Mr DAWSON: No. I think the committee have been very able to give us the opportunity to respond to your questions, so I do not have any closing statement.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Clearly there is a lot of interest in this, and you are at the front end of it. We thank you for the work that you do, genuinely. I think you are doing work when the community has a high expectation of you and you are meeting and exceeding that expectation, so well done. It is difficult, particularly on your staff—very, very difficult. We recognise that.

We thank you for your evidence today. We will send you a transcript for correction of any errors. You need to return that transcript within 10 days. If you do not, we will assume you deem it to be correct. You cannot use the corrections process to change the nature of your evidence, but if there is anything else you want to send us, please feel free to do so. Can I confirm that those documents, those charts that you indicated you would give us, are they public documents? Are we able to publish those?

Mr DAWSON: I have no difficulty making them public. They are not public at the moment—one of them is—but we are certainly happy to leave them with the committee.

The CHAIR: If you leave them with us, we will publish them, as we usually do with information received. We will send you some correspondence about questions on notice and we will see what you can provide us back in answers. Otherwise, thank you for your time today and keep up your good work.

Mr DAWSON: Thanks for your comments and thank you.

Hearing concluded at 11.28 am
