

40TH PARLIAMENT



Community Development and
Justice Standing Committee

Report 11

HEARINGS HELD WITH AGENCIES
RESPONSIBLE FOR COVID-19 RESPONSE

Presented by
Mr P.A. Katsambanis, MLA
November 2020

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Community Development and Justice Standing Committee

Hearings held with agencies responsible for COVID-19 response

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Presented by

Mr P.A. Katsambanis, MLA

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Hearings held with agencies responsible for COVID-19 response

On 11 March 2020, the human coronavirus known as COVID-19 was declared a worldwide pandemic by the World Health Organisation. Shortly afterwards, on 15 March 2020, Hon Francis Logan MLA, Minister for Emergency Services, made a Declaration of State of Emergency in Western Australia.¹ On 16 March 2020, Hon Roger Cook MLA, Minister for Health, declared a Public Health State of Emergency.

The declaration of a state of emergency, the first since the *Emergency Management Act 2005* was enacted, triggered the operation of the State Emergency Coordinator, and the establishment of the State Disaster Council. The State Emergency Coordinator, the Commissioner of Police, is responsible for coordinating the emergency response during a state of emergency. Chaired by the Premier, and including relevant Ministers and the State Emergency Coordinator, the State Disaster Council is the mechanism through which Government is kept informed of developments in response to a state of emergency.² Various other bodies and offices also manage and participate in the State Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³

The Declaration of State of Emergency has been extended approximately every 14 days, and remains in place. During a state of emergency, the State Emergency Coordinator and other authorised officers are granted emergency powers to make directions regarding the movement of people, the closure of places, and quarantine conditions, amongst other things.⁴ In consultation with the Chief Health Officer and various others involved in the State Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the State Emergency Coordinator has made directions that have affected all Western Australians.

Since March 2020, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, all Western Australians have been subject to restrictions on movement, varying in severity based on evolving health advice over time. Many businesses were forced to close, people that could began working from home, travel between intrastate regions was not allowed unless certain criteria for exemption were met, and Western Australia's border was closed to everyone, subject to specific exemptions.

The Community Development and Justice Standing Committee (Committee) oversees emergency services, community services, police and 18 other portfolio areas. Given this role, the Committee thought it important to gain an understanding of how the State's emergency management framework operated, the role of each of the emergency response bodies or offices and their activities, and how lessons being learned during the management of the

1 Hon Francis Logan MLA, Minister for Emergency Services, *Declaration of State of Emergency*, 15 March 2020.

2 Dr Ron Edwards, State Emergency Management Committee, Letter, 29 September 2020, p. 5.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Emergency Management Act 2005*, (WA), Part 6.

State's response to the COVID-19 pandemic were being captured to be leveraged off in the event of a future state of emergency.

Unfortunately, the onset of COVID-19 contributed to the Committee extending the duration of an earlier inquiry, leaving insufficient time before the conclusion of the 40th Parliament for it to conduct a formal inquiry into how the Western Australian Government was responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee also recognised the need for lead government agencies to focus on service provision and their response to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 pandemic, whilst ensuring the health and safety of staff and the public.

Therefore, on 9 September 2020, the Committee resolved to conduct a series of hearings into the Western Australia Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Committee decided to invite agencies or officers to discuss aspects of emergency management including preparedness, response, recovery and support for those affected. These hearings were held in public to enable media attendance and the publication of transcripts that then become available to the public.

State Emergency Management Committee

The Committee first heard from Dr Ron Edwards, Chairman of the State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC). The SEMC is a strategic and advisory body with the following functions:

- a) to advise the Minister on emergency management and the preparedness of the State to combat emergencies
- b) to provide direction, advice and support to public authorities, industry, commerce and the community in order to plan and prepare for an efficient emergency management capability for the State
- c) to provide a forum for whole of community coordination to ensure the minimisation of the effects of emergencies
- d) to provide a forum for the development of community wide information systems to improve communications during emergencies
- e) to develop and coordinate risk management strategies to assess community vulnerability to emergencies
- f) to perform other functions given to the SEMC under the Act;
- g) to perform any other function prescribed by the *Emergency Management Regulations 2006* for the purposes of the Act.⁵

Dr Edwards provided the Committee with useful evidence regarding the operation of the *Emergency Management Act 2005*, the role of the SEMC, and Western Australia's

⁵ *Emergency Management Act 2005*, (WA), s. 14.

emergency management framework, including the extent to which it is suitable for responding appropriately to the current pandemic. He also provided the Committee with a comprehensive letter, available on the Committee's webpage, outlining how the various emergency management agencies relate to each other.

State Emergency Coordinator

The Committee next met with the State Emergency Coordinator, Police Commissioner Chris Dawson, and colleagues Mr Colin Blanch, Deputy Commissioner, and Mr Paul Steel, Acting Deputy Commissioner, Western Australia Police Force. In addition to other functions bestowed upon the State Emergency Coordinator under the *Emergency Management Act 2005*, the role's primary functions are to:

- a) provide advice to the Minister in relation to emergencies
- b) provide advice to the State Disaster Council during a state of emergency
- c) provide such advice and assistance to hazard management agencies as the State Emergency Coordinator considers appropriate
- d) carry out other emergency management activities as directed by the Minister.⁶

The State Emergency Coordinator and colleagues provided information about the role and activities of the Western Australia Police Force in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, including state and national border management, the G2G Pass, and quarantine arrangements including exemptions.

During the hearing the Committee requested, and the State Emergency Coordinator agreed to provide, responses to a number of questions on notice. These questions included requesting a breakdown of the number of people entering Western Australia on a weekly basis since restrictions commenced, exemptions to 'standard' quarantine arrangements, G2G Pass applications, and copies of relevant health advices provided by the Chief Health Officer. Although the State Emergency Coordinator provided comprehensive responses to the Committee's questions, he did not support these responses being made public. In his correspondence he stated:

Given the complexity and changing circumstances in the collection of the data provided to the Committee, publication is not supported unless there is a complete explanation of the statistical breakdown and caveats. The data maintained by the WA Police Force is held across a number of databases and systems and were not collected for the sole purpose of statistical analysis. Due to the changing nature of directions, collection processes and development of systems, the information cannot be verified to provide a sufficient level of confidence as to its accuracy for the purposes of statistical reporting. While each individual travellers' information

6 *Emergency Management Act 2005*, (WA), s. 11.

can be manually interrogated, as previously stated, the process would be overly onerous and beyond current resourcing capacity.⁷

The Committee accepted the Commissioner's explanation as to why the information provided should not be made public. The Committee agrees that during the state of emergency the Western Australian Police Force's efforts should be focused on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic rather than collating information at the level of detail requested by the Committee. However, the collation of this information post-pandemic would provide a useful summary of the actual activity undertaken during the pandemic response.

State Recovery Controller

The Committee next heard from the State Recovery Controller, Ms Sharyn O'Neill, Public Sector Commissioner, and colleagues Ms Rebecca Brown, Acting Director General, and Ms Emily Roper, Deputy Director General, Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The State Recovery Controller is responsible for State level recovery arrangements. This position is only established 'if extraordinary arrangements are required for a specific emergency'⁸, such as when 'an emergency affects several communities, is ongoing, requires State level assistance to resolve issues and needs a regional coordination approach.'⁹

The role of the State Recovery Controller includes:

- ensuring the provision of coordinated recovery support to emergency affected communities through the direction and coordination of the resources made available by public authorities and other persons
- reporting directly to the Premier/Minister as determined by the Government, keeping the State Emergency Coordinator and Hazard Management Agency (Department of Health) informed on the recovery progress
- representing relevant Ministers during consultation with local government(s) on recovery matters
- facilitating the sharing of information to support local and regional recovery activities.¹⁰

The State Recovery Controller and colleagues provided information about current recovery activities and associated challenges. Some matters discussed included the initial development and ongoing review of the WA Impact Statement and Recovery Plan, challenges associated with implementing recovery efforts during an ongoing emergency and for an unknown but significant period of time, and ongoing review processes to identify lessons learned in real time and implement changes to recovery efforts.

7 Mr Chris Dawson, State Emergency Coordinator and Police Commissioner, Letter, 2 November 2020, p. 11.

8 State Emergency Management Committee, *State Emergency Management Plan*, Government of Western Australia, 15 July 2020, p. 74.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Dr Ron Edwards, State Emergency Management Committee, Letter, 29 September 2020, p. 10.

State Welfare Coordinator

Finally, the Committee heard from the State Welfare Coordinator, Ms Michelle Andrews, Director General, Department of Communities and colleagues Ms Rachael Green, Deputy Director General, Ms Geraldine Carlton, Executive Director Emergency Services, and Mr Andrew Sanders, Deputy Welfare Emergency Controller, Department of Communities. The *Emergency Management Regulations 2006* prescribe the Department of Communities as ‘a support organisation responsible for the support function of providing welfare services.’¹¹ Welfare services includes ‘the provision of immediate and ongoing supportive services to alleviate, as far as practicable, the effects on people affected by an emergency.’¹² This may include personal services, including psychological and support services to cope with stress and trauma, and financial assistance.¹³

The State Welfare Coordinator and colleagues provided information about the role and activities of the State Welfare Coordinator and associated welfare bodies. Some matters discussed included resourcing, the support services provided to people in hotel quarantine and vulnerable cohorts including people experiencing family and domestic violence, people experiencing homelessness, and temporary visa holders, and the assessment of applications for waiver of hotel quarantine fees.

The transcript of each of these hearings is, or will shortly be, available on the Committee’s webpage on the Parliament’s website.

Conclusion

Had it had more time before the end of the 40th Parliament, the Committee may have embarked on a formal inquiry into the State Government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ideally, such an inquiry would be conducted after the Declaration of State of Emergency ceases to have effect. Such an inquiry would have allowed it to consult more broadly and consider evidence from other stakeholders. It may be that this, or another, committee of the 41st Parliament, decide to embark on a COVID-19-related inquiry.

The Committee would like to thank the State Emergency Management Committee, State Emergency Coordinator, State Recovery Controller, and State Welfare Coordinator for meeting with the Committee to discuss their roles and activities during a time of great uncertainty and when they have significant demands on their time. The Committee extends this thanks to all of the government and non-government workers who have been involved in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, in some cases being separated from family and risking their own health to care for others, and ensuring that essential services are maintained and the State continues to function.

11 *Emergency Management Regulations 2006*, (WA), r. 32.

12 State Emergency Management Committee, *State Emergency Management Policy*, Government of Western Australia, 15 July 2020, p. 36

13 State Emergency Management Committee, *State Emergency Management Plan*, Government of Western Australia, 15 July 2020, pp. 60, 62.

Finally, it is because of all Western Australians' compliance with the necessary restrictions on movement that Western Australia has reduced the spread of COVID-19 and saved lives. With no community transmission of COVID-19 since April 2020, the State has been able to ease restrictions and return to near-normality. It now finds itself in a strong position to respond to the ongoing risks of the COVID-19 pandemic.



MR P.A. KATSAMBANIS, MLA
CHAIRMAN

Appendix One

Committee's functions and powers

The functions of the Committee are to review and report to the Assembly on: -

- a) the outcomes and administration of the departments within the Committee's portfolio responsibilities;
- b) annual reports of government departments laid on the Table of the House;
- c) the adequacy of legislation and regulations within its jurisdiction; and
- d) any matters referred to it by the Assembly including a bill, motion, petition, vote or expenditure, other financial matter, report or paper.

At the commencement of each Parliament and as often thereafter as the Speaker considers necessary, the Speaker will determine and table a schedule showing the portfolio responsibilities for each committee. Annual reports of government departments and authorities tabled in the Assembly will stand referred to the relevant committee for any inquiry the committee may make.

Whenever a committee receives or determines for itself fresh or amended terms of reference, the committee will forward them to each standing and select committee of the Assembly and Joint Committee of the Assembly and Council. The Speaker will announce them to the Assembly at the next opportunity and arrange for them to be placed on the notice boards of the Assembly.



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