

Senate Select Committee of COVID-19

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Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Opening Statement

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Introduction

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today.

Australia's first case of COVID-19 was recorded on 25 January. Towards the end of March, new daily reported cases peaked at more than 450 and the three day rolling average was growing at more than 30 per cent. In the space of a few months a virus suddenly and radically changed the world and the social and economic freedoms to which Australia is accustomed.

Regrettably there have been a total of 98 lives lost in Australia as a result of the virus. Many Australians have lost their livelihoods or suffered a reduction in income due to the health restrictions put in place to slow its spread. And notwithstanding recent easing of restrictions, Australians are still living with social distancing and isolation. The social and economic consequences will be with us for some time.

But Australia has fared remarkably well. The number of confirmed cases in Australia as a percentage of our population is low compared to other nations. Many of those cases have recovered. And the number of current live cases is remarkably low.

Because of Australia's fundamentals - a world-class health system, strong border protections, strong institutional settings and fiscal headroom, we were one of the most well-prepared and well-equipped countries in the world to respond to the global pandemic.

We have been able to flatten the curve of COVID-19 infections. And we are now on a cautious path of easing restrictions and re-opening the economy.

Australia is in this position because of early and decisive action. In addition to initial health safety measures in January, two actions were critically important. Travel restrictions were applied to China on 1 February when Hubei province was the epicentre of the disease, and the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed on 13 March to the establishment of the National Cabinet which then became – with the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) – the central governance mechanism through which Commonwealth, State and Territory leaders could together make decisions with immediate and long term impacts.

Through National Cabinet, activities likely to spread the virus were stopped and stopped quickly, while other economic activities like construction and mining were able to continue to operate safely.

Commonwealth measures included strengthening the health system for the pandemic, providing early income support payments, the Coronavirus supplement and Jobseeker - to help those affected by necessary health measures which meant businesses had to close - and the JobKeeper wage

subsidy to maintain the connection between employers and employees so as to hasten the recovery after the virus was under control.

But while restrictions are starting to ease, we can't claim victory. There will be more cases and the potential for future outbreaks of the virus remains. Our health system may well still come under pressure. We will continue to face risks and some jobs and businesses will not survive.

Contribution of the APS

I am immensely proud of the contributions from public officials across the Australian Public Service (APS) and from the State and Territory public sectors.

While health professionals have been at the front line, every part of the APS is contributing to the Government's response to COVID-19. Public health officials at the Department of Health have been critical to understanding and minimising the health risk to Australians of COVID-19. From 20 January 2020, when the Department of Health activated the National Incident Room, these officials have been working round the clock observing the evolving global situation, closely monitoring the Australian situation and preparing advice to the AHPPC and the Government on how to contain the spread of the virus.

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet joined the response effort in a significant way to co-ordinate advice to Government prior to its decision, on 1 February 2020, to put in place the first of a series of travel restrictions on foreign nationals entering Australia from mainland China. Subsequent travel restrictions were applied to travel from other countries which experienced outbreaks – Iran, the Republic of Korea and Italy.

Policy officers from across the APS supported the Government in developing significant healthcare and social support measures and three unprecedented economic support packages.

Service delivery agencies have made extraordinary efforts to implement new and greatly expanded programs. Services Australia, for example, has processed over 1 million JobSeeker claims since mid-March. It processed more JobSeeker claims in six weeks than it would normally process in a year.

As at midnight 11 May, JobKeeper Payments to 399,425 eligible employers and business participants to the value of \$4.3 billion had been paid.

As at midnight 11 May, the Australian Taxation Office had approved 1.399 million of early release of superannuation applications (of 1.418 million applications received), with \$11.5 billion approved for release.

The Department of Health, together with Services Australia, has progressively created 279 additional temporary Medicare Benefits Schedule telehealth service items. From their initial introduction on 13 March 2020 until 11 May, they have supported nine million telehealth services to a total of over 5.25 million patients. This initiative is helping Australians observe the physical distancing restrictions necessary to suppress the spread of COVID-19 while still getting the health advice and support they need, where appropriate.

The Digital Transformation Agency and Department of Health, supported by other agencies, developed the Coronavirus information app and the COVIDSafe app to help trace COVID contacts. Since its launch on 26 April 2020, over 5.6 million people have registered with COVIDSafe (as at 0630 13 May).

Supporting coordinated advice and decision making

A critical factor in Australia's effective response to COVID-19 has been the level of cooperation between the Commonwealth and states and territories, between government and industry, and between APS departments and agencies.

To support the National Cabinet process, I have been chairing weekly meetings of the heads of first ministers' departments from all jurisdictions in Australia. Our meetings are focussed on Australia's response to COVID-19, in particular the priorities of National Cabinet.

I have also been speaking regularly over the past two months to my counterpart in New Zealand, and have had a number of discussions with my counterpart in Canada. This has allowed us to share our respective experiences and learn from each other.

Cooperation between Commonwealth, state and territory officials also occurs frequently through the National Coordination Mechanism (NCM) within the Department of Home Affairs. The NCM was commissioned on 5 March 2020 and brings together the Commonwealth and states and territories to resolve non-health COVID-19 issues. Examples of issues considered include: bringing Australians home, supply chains, and consistent management of issues in emergency services.

Also worth touching on now, is the role of the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission, or the NCCC. The NCCC is based in PM&C, and its CEO, Mr Peter Harris AO is here with me today and available to answer questions. The NCCC provides a channel for business, industry and the not-for-profit sector to raise issues and connect to Government. It also helps business to connect with other businesses to match problems with solutions.

Head of the APS and CEO of PM&C

The strong performance of the APS at this time has been made possible by all parts of the service coming together, united by a common purpose, working across organisational boundaries.

Steering the APS enterprise, as I call it, is the Secretaries Board, the principal service-wide governance group for the APS. I chair the Board which comprises the Secretaries of all other departments, the Australian Public Service Commissioner and the Director-General of National Intelligence. Signalling our focus on implementation, the heads of the two major service delivery agencies, the Australian Tax Office and Services Australia, and the Head of the Digital Transformation Agency, are also on the Board as ex-officio members during the crisis.

Over the last two months, I have convened the Board more frequently than normal – typically twice weekly. We discuss ways to enhance the APS's role in the Government's response to COVID-19, including implementation of cross-agency decisions arising from National Cabinet; and APS enterprise management of the APS in a COVID-safe environment, including work, health and safety and wellbeing issues.

Also pivotal to achieving alignment across the APS at this time is the Chief Operating Officers Committee (the COO Committee). The COO Committee includes the COOs from all departments and major agencies and was established by the Secretaries Board in February 2020. The remit of the Committee is to take an enterprise-wide approach to APS operations and management. The COO Committee has met 17 times between mid-March and end of April, and has facilitated consistent messaging across the APS, played a major role in supporting the APS to transition to large scale working from home arrangements throughout March and April 2020, and is supporting the APS's

transition of staff back to usual APS workplaces consistent with the APS Commissioner's direction of 8 May 2020.

The APS quickly and capably implemented the Government's response at an unprecedented scale, operating in a connected, responsive and adaptable way to support the Government and deliver services to Australians. The rapid mobilisation of APS staff to meet demand in critical areas is a good example of this.

On Sunday 22 March 2020, the Prime Minister announced 5,000 extra staff for Services Australia. The Prime Minister made a direction on 26 March under the *Public Service Act 1991* that staff should be deployed to functions critical to the continued delivery of services to the Australian public and the operation of the APS as a whole. In addition to recruiting these 5,000 staff, Services Australia has: deployed 2,100 staff through existing service delivery partners and redeployed more than 3,400 staff from within the Agency. Supported by the APS Workforce Management Taskforce, led by the APS Commissioner, more than 1,700 staff from other Commonwealth agencies have been redeployed to Services Australia to answer calls and process claims.

Contact centres were established in the Department of Social Services premises in Tuggeranong in the ACT and at some additional locations across Australia, and training was rolled out to approximately 12,000 staff.

The APS Commissioner and I have sought to maintain connections with the APS leadership group beyond Secretaries during the pandemic period. On 8 April, Peter Woolcott and I held the first virtual meeting of the APS 200, comprising departmental secretaries, agency heads and deputy secretaries. My key messages to them were that this crisis will be a marathon, not a sprint, and successfully delivering the policies needed to support Australians must remain our focus. This will require the APS to continue to work collaboratively and compassionately, maintaining its line of sight to all Australians, directing resources to meet critical needs and looking after our people. When the health and economic crisis is over, my expectation, along with the Commissioner, is that we take the best of what the APS has delivered as part of the response, and incorporate it into our business as usual. Making sure we continue to operate at our best will ensure the APS comes out of this stronger than when it went in.

Mobilisation has also occurred within the APS at senior levels. PM&C's Deputy Secretary of Social Policy, Ms Caroline Edwards has been acting as Secretary of Health since late February, to allow Dr Brendan Murphy to continue as the Chief Medical Officer and focus on his role of the Chair of AHPPC.

PM&C established a COVID-19 Taskforce as the single point of coordination for COVID-19 in the Department to support our COVID-19 policy coordination and response requirements. A recent key role for the Taskforce was bringing together advice on the next steps for easing restrictions, taking into account the health risks and economic impacts of measures. This work was done in collaboration with the Department of Health, the Commonwealth Treasury and states and territories.

During the restrictions, most of PM&C staff were working from home. I am especially grateful to our corporate team who were able to ensure our IT functioned well with such high remote usage and provide a quality video-conferencing service to allow virtual management and all-staff networking events. They are now preparing the office for a transition of staff to a COVID-safe workplace.

Conclusion

The public service has been working at high intensity since late December when the focus was responding to the bushfires. And like all Australians, they have had to adjust to supporting their fellow Australians while working from home or in a very different office environment.

I am proud of the way the APS has contributed to the Government response.

The risks and impacts of COVID-19 aren't over, and we continue to work hard alongside our State and Territory, and international, counterparts to protect Australians.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.