



LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEES

Public Accountability Committee Supplementary Questions

Inquiry into the NSW Government's Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic

FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND DISABILITY SERVICES

Hearing: 7 October 2020

FAMILY, COMMUNITIES AND DISABILITY SERVICES

Supplementary questions for the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services, the Hon Gareth Ward MP

1. **What additional support has the NSW Government provided to unpaid carers during COVID-19?**

The New South Wales Government funds Carers NSW, the peak organisation for carers in NSW. Carers NSW is monitoring the impact of the pandemic on carers, and has developed ten fact sheets for carers about COVID-19. These fact sheets are available on the organisation's website, and include specific information about community supports.

Information tailored to the specific needs of carers is also available on the Department of Communities and Justice website at <https://www.coronavirus.dcj.nsw.gov.au/services/child-and-family-services/information-for-carers>.

Carers in NSW are encouraged to contact the Commonwealth Carer Gateway <https://www.carergateway.gov.au> for support.

The social media campaign 'It's Caring' launched in Carers week October 2020 and the new Service NSW carers portal also encourage carers to contact the Commonwealth Carer Gateway for support.

2. **What additional mental health supports have been provided to support mental health and wellbeing of unpaid carers during COVID-19?**

I am advised that the NSW Government's social media campaign 'It's Caring' launched in Carers week at: <https://www.caring.dcj.nsw.gov.au/> and the Service NSW carers portal: <https://www.service.nsw.gov.au/guide/> carers both encourage carers to contact the Commonwealth Carer Gateway for support.

Services offered through the Carer Gateway include counselling, connection with other carers, coaching, courses and emergency respite services. It can be accessed at <https://www.carergateway.gov.au/>

The Commonwealth Government provided extra financial support to Carer Gateway providers under its COVID-19 mental health response. Further details are available at <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/covid-19-481-million-for-national-mental-health-and-wellbeing-pandemic-response-plan>. All Gateway providers have

received funding specifically to address carer mental health in the pandemic, including the four Carer Gateway service providers in NSW listed at: <https://www.carergateway.gov.au/help-advice/getting-help>

3. What is the current status of visitor arrangements in NSW juvenile justice facilities?

I am advised that all visits with family members are being conducted virtually. All legal and professional visits are able to be conducted in person, virtually or via the phone.

4. While visitations have been suspended in NSW juvenile justice facilities, what steps were taken to ensure young people could continue to maintain contact with their families?

I am advised that 40 minute virtual visits have been provided to young people. Young people are able to access at least two visits per week of this type. The use of tablets for visits has facilitated access for young people to their family rurally and overseas. Access to these family members would not have been possible prior to the implementation of tablet visits. As at 6 October 2020 almost 2500 had been conducted since the implementation of virtual visits.

5. What additional mental health supports have been provided to support mental health and wellbeing of young people in juvenile justice facilities during COVID-19?

I am advised that Youth Justice staff have worked with all young people in custody and their families to ensure that they understand why family visits are suspended, why hygiene is important, how to maintain daily hygiene, what supports are available in custody, how to access legal and medical services, how to access video visits and phone calls and how to access education and other programs.

Youth Justice has also configured some tablets in custody for telehealth purposes. These are programmed to ensure access to health services if needed and are programmed for privacy.

Mental Health and Specialist clinicians onsite have also increased support provided to young people throughout the 14 day quarantine period. Youth Justice closely monitors indicators of distress including self-harm, and has noted a reduction in self-harm compared with the same period in the previous year.

6. **Were any supports and services in juvenile justice facilities suspended during the COVID-19 restrictions and what substitute services were provided?**

I am advised that there was a short period where community and external professional visitors were unable to attend youth justice centres to provide in person support however services and contact was continued via telephone systems. All centre based casework and psychological services have been maintained during this crisis. The Inspector of Custodial Services, the NSW Ombudsman and Official Visitors have continued to have access to Youth Justice Centres.

7. **What is the current number of people in juvenile justice facilities and how does this compare to the same period last year?**

I am advised that as at midnight 7 October 2020 there were 182 young people in Youth Justice NSW custody, compared to 238 at midnight 7 October 2019.

8. **Has there been an increase in complaints from young people in juvenile justice facilities?**

I am advised that for the 12 months ending on 7 October 2019 there were 22 complaints from young people recorded from Youth Justice Centres. For the 12 months ending 7 October 2020 there were 50 complaints.

Youth Justice has recently reviewed their Complaints Handling Guidelines. These have been updated to include additional support for young Aboriginal people who have a complaint and a mechanism to support these complaints being managed in a culturally competent and safe manner. Youth Justice is also trialling a triage system for feedback and complaints at two Youth Justice Centres. The system is designed to increase trust and promote communication about issues to identify and respond to potential complaints early; and provide a confidential way for young people to raise issues of safety.

9. **When was the last time a survey was conducted on wellbeing of young people or staff in juvenile justice facilities?**

I am advised that wellbeing surveys were conducted on detainees and staff at Acmena Youth Justice Centre in February 2020 as part of the evaluation of the pilot Incentive Scheme.

Wellbeing surveys were conducted on staff at Frank Baxter Youth Justice Centre in December 2019 as part of the evaluation of the Enhanced Support Unit (ESU) training.

Youth Justice is currently in the process of surveying all frontline staff in the custodial operations division, in relation to their leadership support requirements and wellbeing. Two centres have been surveyed this year and the remaining four will be surveyed in November and December 2020.

In June this year all DCJ staff were asked to complete a brief, 10-question survey asking about wellbeing, productivity and their experience of support during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey found that 73 percent of Youth Justice respondents rated their current feeling of wellbeing as seven out of 10 or better. Other positive results included:

- 79 percent of Youth Justice respondents agreed that they are receiving the correct information within the current climate, and
- 72 percent agreed that senior leaders have made effective decisions during this time.

These insights into staff engagement and wellbeing will be further built on through People Matter Employee Survey data – which is now active and open to all DCJ staff. A summary of anonymous responses from employees will be used to identify areas of good practice and where we can make improvements. It will also help DCJ to understand where it may need to shift its focus in order to better support employees and their work.

Youth Justice will also soon start offering young people the opportunity to complete the Child Safe: Young people's safety and empowerment questionnaire as they exit Youth Justice from November 2020. The questionnaire asks questions about young people's wellbeing while they are with Youth Justice.

10. How many young people in foster and kinship care have reached the age of 18 during the Covid-19 pandemic?

I am advised that in the June 2020 quarter (spanning from 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020) 210 young people in out-of-home care reached the age of 18.

11. During the Covid-19, what percentage of young people in foster and kinship care have reached the age of 18 and received Post Care Education Financial Support payments?

I am advised that from 1 March 2020 to 30 September 2020, over 90 young people received a Post Care Education Financial Support payment at a cost of over \$490,000.

12. How many young people who turned 18 while in foster or kinship care left care into homelessness during the Covid-19 pandemic?

I am advised that leaving care plans are developed for young people from age 15 to support them transition from out of home care.. Young people may stay on with their carer/s, seek support to access private accommodation, rent or seek youth housing or other housing pathways. Young people at risk of homelessness can be supported by a referral to youth housing, the Premier's Youth Initiative or Rent Choice Youth or access temporary accommodation, depending on their needs and level of engagement with services.

a. How many have been supported into alternative housing during the pandemic?

I am advised that as at 1 October 2020, over 130 young people aged over 18 years have been supported in Semi Independent Living and Therapeutic Semi Independent living accommodation placements.

13. In your answer to question on notice number 1444 on 10th June 2020, you stated: "In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Communities and Justice advised agencies that it is preferable for a person in foster or kinship care turning 18 to remain living where they are, and if that is not possible, an alternative safe living option must be planned."

a. What additional financial support did you provide to agencies to ensure young people in foster or kinship care turning 18 could remain living where they are or have their alternative safe living option planned?

b. Other than the Post Care Education Financial Support payments, what support is available to a foster or kinship carer to enable a young person in their care to keep living in their home after they turn 18?

I am advised that each young person had a leaving care plan tailored to their own individual circumstance. Information on the supports including financial supports available to young people

turning 18 are outlined on the department's website

<https://www.coronavirus.dcj.nsw.gov.au/service-providers/information-for-permanency-support-program-ppsp-service-providers#howtoensure>

Agencies receive an annual Leaving Care payment of \$1,320.78 for three years to help with leaving care planning for a young person aged 15 to 17 who is leaving long term care. In 2019-20, over \$900,000 was provided to care leavers for accommodation establishment costs and over \$360,000 via a fortnightly aftercare allowance for care leavers who were studying full time and would have been at risk of homelessness without assistance.

In addition, the department has created a Living Arrangement Agreement designed to help young people and carers come to an agreement about the young person staying on in the home. Casework continues after 18 to implement the leaving care plan which means that assistance is available to support care leaver's accommodation needs whether they remain in the carer's home or not.

- 14. You have also stated in response to questions on notice that the department does not capture data on the housing, employment and education status of young people after they leave care. Why is it that the department does not capture this kind of data?**

I am advised that young people are able to seek help and advice post 18 from the department, their agency, through the Care Leavers Line and / or be referred to a specialist aftercare service. The department does not always maintain ongoing contact with young people after they leave care. There is no automatic right to access this information because there are no court orders in place.

- 15. How many people experiencing homelessness were provided with temporary accommodation from March to September 2020?**

I am advised:

17,337 Households (23,573 people).

Data valid 1 April 2020 - 4 October 2020.

- 16. How many people are currently being provided with temporary accommodation?**
- a. **How does this compare to this time last year?**

I am advised that as at 18 October 2020 there were 1,363 people in temporary accommodation (963 households).

- a. This compares with 1,238 people in temporary accommodation (824 households) as at 18 October 2019.

17. How many people provided with temporary accommodation since March 2020 to September have been permanently housed?

- a. **How many people have returned to homelessness?**

I am advised that 2,955 people (including 1610 housed in social housing and 1345 assisted with private rental products) who were provided with temporary accommodation, have received assistance from DCJ to access or maintain stable housing

Data valid 1 April 2020 - 4 October 2020.

- a) I am advised that the department does not have data on those who have returned to homelessness after being housed.

18. What was the expenditure on temporary accommodation during the period of March 2020 to end of September 2020?

I am advised that expenditure on temporary accommodation was \$41.5 million dollars for the six months from March 2020 to September 2020.

- a. **How does this compare with 12 months ago?**

I am advised that expenditure on Temporary Accommodation was \$19.1 million dollars for the 6 months from March 2019 to September 2019.

19. What plans are in place should community transmission increase and people experiencing homelessness need to be accommodated to be kept healthy and well?

I am advised that should community transmissions increase homelessness services will be able to access this temporary accommodation funding to help people self-isolate. Further, eligible clients that are not currently accommodated in homelessness services would be able to access Temporary Accommodation, as happened during the peak of the crisis in late 2019-20.

The stimulus funding is still being accessed to reduce the concentration of homeless people living in congregate facilities, and the department is working closely with homelessness service providers, including the peak organisations, other government departments and community housing providers to assist those people into longer term housing solutions.

Homelessness Accommodation and COVID-19 Guidelines have been developed providing information and advice to homelessness accommodation services about how to manage and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, including how to plan for and minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection among staff and residents. The guidelines are updated as required in consultation with NSW Health and published on the department's website.

20. How many people accessed Rent Choice rental subsidies during the COVID Pandemic?

a. How does this compare with 12 months ago?

I am advised from 27 March 2020 to 30 September 2020, COVID stimulus funds were used to help 1,459 new households access Rent Choice rental subsidies and 1,761 existing households with a freeze on the tapering of their rental subsidy or an increase in their rental subsidy (due to loss of income).

There was no noticeable change in people accessing Rent Choice Start Safely or Rent Choice Youth rental subsidies when compared to 12 months ago.

21. What was the expenditure on Rent Choice rental subsidies during the COVID Pandemic?

a. How does this compare with 12 months ago?

I am advised that between 27 March 2020 and 30 September 2020, over \$4.8m has been spent on Rent Choice rental subsidies for people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The expenditure on Rent Choice rental subsidies has increased over the past 12 months. This is attributed to multiple factors including not exiting clients and freezing tapers on rental subsidies from 27 March 2020 to 30 September 2020.

22. What was the budget for Rent Choice Assist (COVID19)?

a. Was this expended?

I am advised the Government provided an additional \$34 million to prevent and respond to homelessness as part of the second stage of its economic package aimed at keeping people in jobs, helping businesses and supporting our most vulnerable in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes:

- \$14 million to increase the supply and flexibility of temporary accommodation, with an immediate focus on accommodation for rough sleepers, and
- \$20 million to help secure stable housing in the private rental market.

I am advised more than 1,600 households have been supported to maintain, or secure housing, in the private rental market through our Rent Choice assistance packages.

23. Why did Rent Choice Assist (COVID19) end on 30 July?

- a. **Given it has ceased, what plans are in place to support people in rental stress & at risk of homelessness following economic impacts of COVID-19?**

I am advised the Department of Communities and Justice opened an expression of interest process for a time limited period to 31 July 2020. DCJ continues to provide a range of private rental assistance products through Rent Start and Rent Choice to maintain their private rental tenancies, relocate to more affordable accommodation or start a new tenancy.

24. How did the Government utilise the services from the Specialised Homelessness sector in terms of assistance during the Pandemic?

I am advised DCJ worked closely with the three homelessness peaks Homelessness NSW, DVNSW and Yfoundations to ensure that key information was being distributed to Specialist Homelessness Services. The homelessness peaks also worked with DCJ and services to ensure that Business Continuity Plans were in place and that there were adequate food supplies available for services and their clients.

Homelessness NSW hosted regular webinars with Specialist Homelessness Services and DCJ communicated key information at these webinars. The webinars were also on occasion attended by NSW Health or other health experts to explain key infection control measures.

DCJ also liaised with the peaks when deconcentrating congregate care facilities and coordinating an approach in regional NSW for self-isolation options

DCJ accelerated its expansion of Assertive Outreach services. Assertive Outreach services are now operating in over 50 local government areas across all seven DCJ Districts. 66 SHS are supporting Assertive Outreach activities by participating in street patrols or providing post-crisis support.

The Inner City Rough Sleeping COVID-19 Taskforce was created to respond to the people sleeping rough and clients staying in large congregate crisis accommodation who were unable to maintain social distancing. This included a wide range of stakeholders including specialist homelessness services (SHS), local government, local Health Districts and NSW Police.

- The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) provided funding to SHS providers to utilise hotel accommodation to de-concentrate clients living in large crisis accommodation facilities.
- The Taskforce coordinated outreach services conducted by SHS, DCJ and St Vincent's Health to engage people sleeping rough and support them into Temporary Accommodation.
- DCJ provided funding for the new STEP-Link model through to June 2021, to provide engagement and case worker support for clients in Temporary Accommodation who were previously sleeping rough, assisting them into longer-term housing options. DCJ utilised an existing Specialist Homelessness provider - Neami National - to deliver this model, based on its record of successfully delivering similar programs for people sleeping rough.
- DCJ provided additional funding to an existing Aboriginal homelessness service, Innari Inc., totalling \$117,547 for a 12 month period for an additional 1.0 FTE Aboriginal outreach worker to engage Aboriginal clients sleeping rough moving into temporary accommodation and long term permanent housing.
- DCJ liaised with STEP-Link and Homelessness NSW to distribute a call-out to the Specialist Homelessness sector, to identify available staff capacity to be redeployed to assist people placed in temporary accommodation. 70 NGO staff were identified as available; STEP-Link then coordinated the allocation of these workers to clients in hotels.
- Specialised Homelessness services identified clients that were in their transitional properties that were housing ready. These clients could be offered an ongoing housing option and the service would then house a client from the temporary accommodation hotels in their transitional property and provide wrap around support.
- DCJ Deputy Secretary held several online consultations with the sector to identify capacity to support responses in the event of an outbreak in social housing estates. DCJ identified NCOSS as the coordinating agency for NGOs in the event such an outbreak occurred.

25. What additional training and/or resources were provided to Specialised Homelessness Services in order for them to meet the demands during the Covid Pandemic?

I am advised that to assist homelessness accommodation services, the Department of Communities and Justice produced guidelines with health advice on mitigating against or responding to COVID-19. These guidelines were first released in April and have been updated regularly since. A fifth edition with additional information on the role of the Public Health Unit was released in early September. The guidelines are proactively reviewed for new information and will be updated to match current information whenever necessary.

Please also refer to response to Question 24.

26. What resources / financial support was provided to support them to re-orient their service provision and support clients and people experiencing homelessness?

I am advised in response to COVID-19, the NSW Government has made a substantial investment in services to ramp up accommodation and support for people impacted by homelessness and the COVID-19 situation, including:

- \$14.32m for emergency temporary accommodation to enable people to self-isolate
- \$20.02m for rental subsidies to enable people to access or sustain private rental accommodation and prevent homelessness
- \$10m to support charities, including \$3m for delivery of the STEP-Link project, supporting people placed in temporary accommodation as a result of the pandemic, with a key focus on people who were sleeping rough, and \$6m additional funding for Lifeline's operations in NSW
- More than \$21m to boost domestic and family violence (DFV) services (including women's refuges and SHS providers delivering a DVRE response), through the DFV Stimulus Package (\$8.8m in Commonwealth funding and \$12.8m state investment)
- \$1.179m of the DFV stimulus funding has enabled a DFV pop up safe house in the Manly area for 6 months, to provide highly vulnerable women and their children with temporary and emergency accommodation
- Funding for deep cleaning in crisis refuges and large congregate care facilities was provided as part of a \$250m Stimulus Package
- On 8 June 2020, the NSW Government announced \$36m under the Together Home Program to deliver a large scale housing response to transition people from Temporary Accommodation

(TA) into secure housing, providing further support for those people accommodated in TA in response to COVID-19. On 2 November 2020, an additional \$29m was announced for Together Home, bringing the total investment to \$65m.

- \$1.5m has been allocated to support Under 16's
- An additional \$1.3m is being allocated for additional cleaning of congregate care facilities and CHP properties to 30 September 2020.
- An additional \$4.5m is also being allocated to support people to sustain their tenancies.

27. What modelling has been undertaken by the NSW Government regarding ongoing and projected demand for homelessness services following the economic impacts of COVID-19?

I am advised that the NSW Government is continuing to closely monitor use of housing and homelessness services during COVID-19 and will work with the sector to respond to any emerging issues.

28. What modelling has been undertaken by the NSW Government regarding the financial sustainability of homelessness services following the economic impacts of COVID-19?

I am advised that specialist homelessness services are scheduled to provide an acquittal of grant funding received from the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) by the end of the calendar year. Acquittal information submitted by specialist homelessness services will be reviewed by DCJ with the view to identify emerging financial sustainability issues as a result of COVID-19.

29. What funding certainty do homelessness services currently have? What is their current contractual arrangements and when is this guaranteed until?

I am advised that the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) has recently extended contracts with specialist homelessness services until 30 June 2021. DCJ is working closely with homelessness peaks to inform the approach for recommissioning services from 1 July 2021.