

DPIE Joint Consultative Committee 4 June 2020: members' update

The PSA representatives and delegates continued discussions with DPIE at the Joint Consultative Committee on Thursday 4 June 2020. In keeping with the spirit of the times, the meeting was held via the Teams system and there were many topics discussed at length.

COVID-19 response

Within the DPIE cluster there were three confirmed cases of COVID-19 and no reported cases within the past eight weeks. Those offices where cases were identified had an evacuation of the office, appropriate tracing and subsequent extensive/deep cleaning.

COVID-19 return to office-based work

DPIE has informed the PSA that it has completed risk assessments for every office work location throughout the cluster and has developed a return to 'normalised' operations with the focus on four primary drivers:

1. the paramount risk to the health of staff
2. the setup of current facilities in particular IT
3. the management of teams
4. building facilities.

Responding to concerns from delegates, DPIE reaffirmed its commitment to continue with outfitting of 'agile workplaces' including the Armidale Office. DPIE was confident it was compliant with the current COVID-19 restrictions and the building/workspace specifications complied with Safework Guidelines.

The DPIE Secretary and representatives were very clear that a staged return to offices was the best and preferred option and there was little hurry in returning staff to office locations if there was no business imperative. The Premier's guidelines also stress the importance of work-from-home arrangements to relieve stress on the NSW public transport system.

The current Public Health Orders are very specific in that staff who can work practicably from home and ask for work from home can continue to do so. The obvious issues focus on a demonstration of the work done and the hours taken to complete.

Staff who are new to Parramatta Square would take priority in moving as they currently have no work 'residence' and are able to complete their induction to SPQ without other staff in the building.

Office relocations

DPIE has confirmed COVID-19 will not affect the timing of the staff transfers to new office locations, with Orange confirmed for late 2020 and Newcastle confirmed for 2021. There appeared to be some issues with respect to the movements of EPA and EES staff from the Newcastle office and DPIE was tasked with confirming the previous advice given.

Annual leave accruals & leave plans

The COVID-19 response has seen a massive reduction in the annual leave, as well as sick and flex leave, taken by DPIE staff over the past 12 weeks. DPIE has relaxed the Treasury-mandated requirements surrounding the



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accruals of annual leave. The 30 days' accrual limits technically still applies and will be revisited when there is a relaxation or lifting of state and international borders. Those members with balances heading towards or past 30 days should begin discussions with their managers in earnest and have a plan developed on the eventual taking of annual leave in order to meet those requirements later on this year. No plan, no excuse.

Budgetary situation for 2020/21

Budgets remain a cause for consternation as the fall-out from the COVID-19 crisis and previous bushfires, droughts and floods continue to be realised. The DPIE Secretary advised there are no budgets set down from 2020/21 as yet and a realistic scenario is that these wouldn't be finalised until much closer to the end of the year.

Previous PSA correspondence highlighted the need for the DPIE to find \$81 million in savings for the period 2019/20 with a further, more significant savings to be found for the period 2020/21/22. The fundamental concern is that any such arbitrary figures that can't be found in an office chair, consultants or advertising will require restructuring and the subsequent loss of programs and jobs.

It would be a smart Government that realises such cuts to programs and staff during a time where communities are reeling from one crises to another would be a recipe for disaster. NSW needs more funds and programs not further cuts.

DPIE Dr Care

DPIE has engaged a health provider to provide free an independent online health care for staff for any health or allied health issue, similar to the mental health service (EAPS). The main driver is for reduced work compensable issues and subsequent claims. The PSA sought information on the information that would be collected by DPIE and was heartened to hear that there is no involvement or information collection from DPIE.

No staff freeze

Whilst there is no effective staff freeze, the DPIE has made conscious decisions on what roles to fill and not to fill in order to meet the savings target prescribed by NSW Treasury and this Government. The PSA is concerned about staff doing more than one job in order to provide the service to our stakeholders at a time when they are relying on those services the most.

The question for members and for DPIE is what work doesn't get done and how does that affect the communities they are supposed to help. The PSA will continue to hold the DPIE Secretary to the previous commitments that less staff will not be doing more work.

Creation of DRNSW/movement of corporate staff to DRNSW

During the first weeks of the COVID-19 response, the NSW Government announced the creation of the Department of Regional NSW and following Administrative Orders, picked up a number of agencies and transferred them to the new entity. Corporate DPIE staff, who have just been brought together, are being transferred to DRNSW using Clause 29 of the *Government Sector Employment Rules*.

The information sought by the PSA was what corporate services will be done in-house to DRNSW and what will be provided as fee for service by DPIE. This includes matters such as Service Level Agreements and those Senior



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staff members with overall responsibilities. This kind of thought has many of the hallmarks of a 'shared services' model.

Temporary & casual staff

The DPIE Secretary provided commitments to temporary and casual staff until 25 September and was quick to retort the PSA concern that the 25 September 2020 date was a cliff where swathes of temporary staff would not be renewed. The DPIE confirmed that all temporary contracts are to be reviewed and some agencies have already informed staff that some contracts will not be renewed past 25 September.

The fundamental concern is the amount of contracts that will not be renewed, the extra work that will be heaped onto staff to fill those gaps, the regional communities that will be affected by the loss of jobs, and the numbers and types of programs that will be curtailed in a process to find arbitrary budget savings.

DPIE Flexible Working Hours Agreement – consolidated

DPIE has identified 12 differing Flexible Working Hours Agreements that currently exist in the agency, in part due to the Government Administration Orders from October 2019. The DPIE has the notion to streamline and consolidate these agreements into one cluster-wide FWHA. Staff would be aware that with all 'Local Arrangements' or Flex Agreements there is a duration, review and termination clause. DPIE has flagged this proposal and has not done any work discussions within individual agencies.

Some agencies, such as Sydney Olympic Park Authority, have very limited arrangements and the PSA has pursued this issue in order for the current DPIE agreement to be provided to those staff as the first step in any process.

When/if DPIE continues with the process, the PSA will seek the input from all members and as with all local arrangements, will ballot the membership in order to obtain consent.

Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Branch Transfer – Administrative Order

The DPIE has confirmed that the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Branch will transfer to the Department of Premier & Cabinet on 1 July 2020. Administrative Orders will be provided by Government before 1 July 2020. This includes temporarily appointed ACH staff through to 25 September but does not include those same commitments from Contingent labour.

