



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**

Your Ref:
Our Ref:
Contact:

The Honourable Roger Cook MLA
Acting Premier of Western Australia
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Dear Acting Premier

HOTEL QUARANTINE ARRANGEMENTS – RELEASE OF TRAVELLERS AT DAY 12 WITH TWO DAYS IN SELF-QUARANTINE

I am writing to update you on the arrangements I have implemented to meet the changing operational requirements within the State Quarantine Hotels (SQHs).

On 05 January 2022, I directed the State Health Incident Coordination Centre (SHICC) to modify the operations of the SQHs to enable the release of fully vaccinated travellers from the SQHs on Day 12 and to permit them to continue their quarantine in a suitable premise for a further two days. This had become an operational necessity due to the increasing pressures on the system, which I have outlined below. This decision was based on an assessment of the public health risk, which identified both the minimal public health risk to the community and the reduced risk to the travellers staying in hotel quarantine from the proposed modification to the current operational procedures.

Background

Hotel quarantine has been an effective control measure in protecting the Western Australian community from COVID-19 since March 2020. Over 63,000 guests have completed hotel quarantine in Western Australia. There are five (5) hotels that are currently requisitioned to support the State's quarantine requirements.

Since November 2021, there has been increasing pressure on the availability of rooms within the SQH facilities and this pressure is not expected to abate over the next month. Although the international flight cap has been halved to 265 per week effective from 26 December 2021, the impact on available accommodation at SQH facilities is gradual and will not be realised until 14 days has lapsed (i.e. 09 January 2022). In addition, the SQH system also receives "above cap" arrivals, consisting of essential and highly skilled workers, including health care workers, from overseas and jurisdictions that are now at 'extreme' risk.

The estimated number of rooms utilised per week is 550 and is made up of: international passengers (265 rooms); domestic passengers from 'extreme risk' jurisdictions (150 rooms); self-quarantine breaches and domestic refusals (15 rooms); maritime off signers (100 rooms); and exemptions 'above cap' (20 rooms). This has been further exacerbated in the last two weeks with the addition of cases and close contacts related to the Backpacker Delta variant cluster.

The escalation of Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) to 'extreme risk' jurisdictions from 12.01am Saturday, 08 January 2021 will result in further pressure on the SQH system. This could equate to an additional 50 passengers per week based on arrival data from Victoria and NSW (noting there are no direct flights from the ACT at present).

The current capacity in the SQH system has been maximised by removing some key elements of the 'gold standard' room allocation principles, developed in response to the independent quarantine system review recommendations. Due to the increased demand on SQH rooms, SHICC has needed to remove the buffer rooms between cohorts of guests, and to remove the 'zipper' model in hotels with negative pressure rooms. Reduction in these risk mitigation measures increases the potential risk of transmission to hotel quarantine staff and the SQH guests who are staying in the facility. Two recent infections in hotel quarantine staff highlight both the increased transmissibility of the Omicron variant and the importance of maintaining the risk mitigation strategies where practicable. An operational decision has been previously made to allow guests to leave SQH several hours earlier on Day 14 after receipt of a negative PCR test; however, this has had only a minimal impact on room availability.

Public Health Risk

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US) states that there is growing evidence that people infected with the Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus are most infectious in the two days before and three days after symptoms develop; on this basis, they recommend that asymptomatic cases can have a shortened isolation period of 5 days. Recent research also notes that the incubation period for the Omicron variant, which is now the dominant variant being seen, is shorter than other variants at 3 days.

It should be noted that since the introduction of a Day 5 midpoint test in SQHs, there has only been one case found on a Day 13 test, which indicates that nearly all cases are found within the first five days of arrival. This proposal, to release fully vaccinated people on Day 12 after a negative Day 11 test to self-quarantine for the remaining two days, does not increase the risk to the community and is expected to partially decrease the risk of cross-infection within the hotel.

Recommendation

To meet the urgent demand for space in the SQH system, I have directed that quarantining guests in SQH facilities be released on Day 12 to continue their quarantine period in self-quarantine.

This is only to apply where the following conditions are met:

- guests are double vaccinated;
- guests have tested negative on three occasions during their SQH stay (Days 1, 5 and 11); and
- guests have a suitable premise to stay for the completion of quarantine to Day 14.

It is anticipated that this change will immediately release approximately 80 rooms if all travellers satisfy required conditions. The release of this cohort will result in minimal public health risk, but will reduce the risks of transmission of COVID-19 to guests during their hotel quarantine stay.

I provide this information to you for noting and would seek to reassure you that I will continue to closely monitor this situation.

Yours sincerely



Dr Andy Robertson
CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER

6 January 2022