

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors

Melbourne—Wednesday, 14 April 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Mr Mark Gepp

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESSES

Mr Simon Thewlis, Save Victorian Events;

Mr Tiny Good, Director, Showtech Australia; and

Mr Howard Freeman, Founding Director, CrewCare.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised. I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I wish to welcome any members of the public that are watching via the live broadcast. I would like to also introduce my fellow committee members that are present with us here today: Mr David Davis, Ms Wendy Lovell, Mrs Bev McArthur and Ms Sheena Watt. I also have Mr Tim Quilty via the Zoom broadcast.

To all witnesses: all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law; however, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

We welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion and questions. Could you please begin by stating your name for our Hansard team and then start the presentation.

Mr THEWLIS: My name is Simon Thewlis. I am representing today Save Victorian Events. I have got an overview, and then we will absolutely go right into questions.

My name is Simon Thewlis. I have proudly been a member of the event industry in Victoria for 39 years, including 30 years as a business owner. I have produced a vast range of events, from major public events, music events, charity and community events through to high-end business events, and have worked across nearly every part of Victoria's event industry.

Today I am here representing Save Victorian Events, the main group that has been representing the people and businesses that work in the event industry throughout this crisis. I will quickly introduce the others, as they would be too modest to do it themselves. They are both very well known around the world as being amongst the very best in their fields. Tiny Good is a rigger. He and his company, Showtech, are renowned around the world for aerial rigging with performers at the Athens Olympics to the flying trams at the Melbourne Commonwealth Games and far beyond. He can share the experience of being a business owner in the midst of this crisis. Howard Freeman has been a tour manager and production manager of acts starting from the likes of Sherbet and AC/DC through to the Big Day Out and has toured most of the world's top music acts around Australia, amongst other things. He is here today as Chair of CrewCare, an organisation that supports crew who are doing it tough. He can talk about some crew, what they have gone through and why you should be in awe of these people. We only have an hour to cover a huge, complex and generally misunderstood industry. So we do need to get more real people in front of you during the course of this.

Victoria has long been viewed as Australia's event state. Melbourne has traditionally been viewed as a global event capital. Events are integral to Victoria's identity, but importantly, events are integral to what makes living in Victoria great. Victoria's event industry is a large, well-established industry that organises more than 120 000 events a year that are worth more than \$12 billion in terms of direct economic spend and employs over 70 000 people. While there is much emphasis on the small number of really big events, it is actually the 100 000-plus other events that make the greatest contribution to life in Victoria and contribute the most in terms of employment and economic activity.

Victoria's event industry is best defined as the people and businesses involved in the professional creation and management of events in and—this is really important—from Victoria. The events include business events, such as product launches, conferences, exhibitions, brand activations; public and community events, from small community events up to St Kilda Festival; charity dinners; galas; fundraising walks; the many music festivals; fashion festival; triathlons; fun runs—and that is just a bit. The businesses include event organisers, suppliers, freelancers and contractors, venues and caterers. It is a vast army of incredibly talented, skilled and experienced people. The vast majority of the economic activity is by small businesses.

Importantly, a lot of the event industry businesses export their products, services and events around Australia and overseas, but it is important to understand what events are about—what they do. For a community event, it can be to build a sense of community, to connect people, to enable greater social cohesion or just to raise the spirits of the community. Business events will be about bringing people together to inform them, to build teams, to change the culture of the organisation, to embrace new technology or innovation. For not-for-profits, it can be about promoting their cause, educating their members or raising funds for their work. Music festivals bring people together to share experiences they will often remember for the rest of their lives. Some events are about marketing and tourism—the grand prix is an example of that—but in most cases tourism is a benefit from the event and not the event's primary purpose.

Events make an extraordinary contribution to life in Victoria and touch on the lives of most Victorians on a regular basis, but there is a lot of confusion about our industry. We do overlap with some other sectors, but we are very distinct from them. We certainly overlap with the arts, with festivals and the like, and similarly with sport, with some of the major sporting events and activities and activations at them. Some events do help drive tourism, but a lot actually do not. So the event industry is not the tourism industry; we have a completely different purpose, operational model, economic model and supply chain.

Again, many event industry suppliers export their services to other states and overseas, like Norwest, who are providing audio for the Tokyo Olympics and have for every Olympics since Athens with the exception of Beijing. Most event companies organise events in other states, but a lot of the economic benefit in employment from those events still is happening in Victoria.

Sadly, much of what the event industry does has been dumbed down to hotel room nights and trips to the penguins, and at the government level we do seem to have been kidnapped by tourism folk and vested interests. These three sectors—arts, tourism and sport—have received over \$2 billion in state government support while the event industry remains empty-handed and struggling.

Save Victorian Events began back in July with nine of us, all small business people with decades of experience at the front line. Between us we know most of the industry. We were deeply concerned that our industry was being decimated and the government was doing nothing. We were watching all our friends and colleagues really struggle, with many losing everything. So we got to work organising, which is what we do for a living.

We quickly had close to 2000 people and businesses from right across Victoria's event industry actively involved in our campaign, writing emails, contacting their MPs—including you guys—doing surveys and finally getting their voices heard. We have been the main source of information for the event industry about what is happening at the government level and the main source of information from the front line of the event industry back to government. We have ended up setting the agenda about the event industry at both the state and federal levels, doing all this while struggling to keep our own small businesses alive. We have no funding, no staff, no suppliers with government organisations.

Being a very modern industry, we have taken a very modern approach to this. As an example, the largest online group for Victoria's event industry has 5500 members. Our industry has never had a peak body. You will hear it suggested otherwise later today, but it is complete nonsense for some pretty obvious reasons. Our group has spent nine months at the front line, listening to all the real stories from our event friends and colleagues every week. We are still the only group to have done extensive surveys of our industry, and reading the detailed survey comments from 700 of our colleagues was just horrific. We have shared quite a few of these comments with the inquiry.

We have spent a truly extraordinary amount of time trying to deal with government over the last nine months. There have been countless roundtables where we were talked at, talked down to, by people with no real knowledge of our industry, who often treated us as idiots. For so long nothing happened. At one large

roundtable in mid-November, on me asking why the event industry had received no financial support, the deputy secretary simply said that the industry had not received any financial support because the event industry is not an industry. On asking, soon after, why there were still no published guidelines for business events, we were told that business events are not really a type of event. Business events in Victoria are worth over \$10 billion.

Despite being one of the very hardest hit industries it took us eight months—so till February—to get a meeting to talk about financial support. It was only for 30 minutes and nothing has happened since. In stark contrast, we spent a couple of hours with the most senior people in the federal Treasury talking about our industry; I am back with the 2IC there on Monday. There has still never been a meeting between the event industry and the Department of Health and Human Services even though we have decades of experience in complex risk management, up to terrorism. Hence, we still have largely unworkable restrictions, guidelines and approval processes. There has just been an unwillingness to sit down and work through stuff together to get good outcomes, and as event people we know that sitting down together and working through stuff is how you get stuff done.

The last 13 months have been horrific for our industry. Over 100 000 events worth more than \$10 billion have been lost. Most event businesses have lost the majority of their income. Seventy-four per cent of full-time jobs are no longer there. With JobKeeper gone, 40 per cent of companies are likely to close and a further 43 per cent will need to let their staff go—and the staff being let go is absolutely happening. Sixty-nine per cent of the highly skilled freelancers we all rely on will need to leave the industry. And these are real people; it is not just numbers. Events are starting to come back again, but it is really slow. For many types of events, maybe 10 per cent are back, but there are still many of us who have not done a single event since 13 March 2020. And now we are going into the quiet winter period, so how many businesses can survive without any real income until later in the year?

A huge number of events are not happening because people cannot get insurance against cancellation due to lockdowns and the like, and that is from the smallest not-for-profits up to the largest during festivals. The simple answer is: unless there is massive change, a lot of people and businesses just will not survive. We will lose a lot of Victoria's event capability and a large number of great people and businesses, things we just cannot get back again. We certainly can no longer be the event state or a global event city.

We are event people, so we are practical people. As an industry, we do know what is needed. Our plan is very simple, and it starts with fixing the underlying problems. We need the event industry to be recognised as a real industry, as an important industry to Victoria and to Victoria's future. We need the real contributions that our events make to Victoria to be finally understood and valued, and we need the extraordinary skills, talents and resources of the event industry to be valued, as they should be getting used a lot during this crisis because they are so relevant. We need a dedicated government agency—Events Victoria—to be set up to support, develop and promote Victoria's events industry, including as an export industry, an agency that has people who understand the events industry and are committed to working with us and supporting us. We need some real financial support for the event companies, event suppliers and the freelancers and contractors so they can survive until later in the year when events start picking up again. And we need COVID cancellation insurance to be underwritten by governments so that many events can start happening again. The document you all will have received goes through all of this in vastly more detail, with vastly more recommendations.

Our events industry can have a great future. Victoria's events industry can continue to make a huge contribution to life in Victoria. Coming through a pandemic, events have never been more needed and more valuable. Victoria's events industry is a vast number of people and businesses who have worked all their lives to create great events. They deserve better than this. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Simon, for that comprehensive overview of some of the issues faced by the events sector. Tiny and Howard, would you like to make a short contribution as well, before we get into questions?

Mr GOOD: My name is Tiny Good from Showtech Australia. I am known as Tiny. I do not think many people actually know my Christian name. I was known as 'Tiny' in 1988 at World Expo 88, and it has been Tiny ever since. I believe that I represent a vast majority of the business owners in the entertainment industry. Show Tech has got, as Simon said, a massive reputation all the way around the world. I have worked on major events such as the Commonwealth Games, the Olympics, the Rugby World Cup, openings of major events at

major venues all around the world. I started in the events industry in the very, very early 1980s. However, besides the hype, it is me, it is my wife, it is our house; it is all I have ever done. We do not have children because I look after my crew like my family. The impact of this is we have received the small business government grants, and I do thank the Victorian government for those grants. That is it. As a private enterprise we do not qualify for any arts assistance. We do not qualify for any other government assistance because we are a private enterprise. We are a small business, so we fall through that gap.

We own currently an estimated \$4.5 million dollars worth of equipment that is sitting in a leased warehouse for which we are still paying rent to our landlord. He has been very, very generous with reducing that rent, but we still have to meet the rent every month. We have been surviving, keeping our crew on JobKeeper as much as we can, but obviously we still have to pay all of the taxes and other charges and insurances and everything else that goes along with that. So JobKeeper is fantastic to actually put money in the pocket of the crew, but the on-cost to the business is actually horrific, and I do not think people actually understand how many dollars are required by the business owner to pay somebody on JobKeeper. We have had a small amount of work coming in doing maintenance and installations in venues, and we are very, very grateful to our clients that have been doing that.

We own, as I said, about \$4.5 million worth of equipment that you cannot use anywhere else. Where else can we hire trusses, chain hoists, performer flying harnesses, winching systems, computer control systems, load monitoring equipment specifically designed for the entertainment industry? So hearing politicians say, 'Just pivot into another industry'—where? If you were a construction company and you had \$4.5 million worth of materials sitting in the yard and you were getting people going, 'Oh, just go and build another house, but you can't use any of those materials', people would be screaming. But as the events industry, as the entertainment industry, we do not have that choice. We cannot go anywhere else.

I have been heavily involved in the development training of the entertainment industry for nearly 30 years. I was one of the authors of the *International Code of Practice for Entertainment Rigging*, which massively raised the safety standards of entertainment rigging all around the world. Showtech has always been a big supporter of Entertainment Assist, CrewCare and all of the other mental health and physical welfare organisations for crew. Showtech has also been part of pretty much every major disaster response since 1990. We were part of responding to the Black Saturday bushfires. We were part of the concerts for floods and fire relief and everything else that has happened since 1990. We donated goods and services to people like Operation Angel, who delivered equipment to the floods in Queensland and more recently the bushfires, including our guys getting into trucks, driving into central Victoria to drop off welfare packs for the firefighters and the emergency responders. So we are not just a business; we give back to the community.

I believe that I learned my code of conduct, my ethics and my work practices from being part of the events industry: the discipline that you learn, the planning you learn, the life skills and other skills that you learn as being part of the events industry. If we could teach our children in secondary school these skills, we would be in a much better place than we are at the moment, because we are taught in this industry to rely on each other, to problem solve, to think on our feet and to not just give up the moment it starts getting hard. If we gave up the moment it started getting hard, we would not be sitting here. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Tiny. Howard, would you like to—

Mr FREEMAN: I will throw a bit of babble at you right now. We will take this to a more personal level. My name is Howard Freeman, and I am a Founding Director of CrewCare, which is a not-for-profit charity. I have been involved in this business for 55 years, my family for 116 in live entertainment and live music, so we have seen a bit. I have two children involved in this business. One just got the flick from the Byron blues festival when that was closed. He drove from Torquay to there to be a stage manager and production manager on that event, and he has come home with nothing in his pocket and no hope. The light that is looking at him down the tunnel is the train coming at him.

What concerns me—over my journey and the 6000 shows I have done, the 600-odd acts I have worked with, the amazing events we have done and the joy we have brought to the world—is we are not recognised. We have no assistance. Our industry is five times more liable to suicide and self-harm than general society. We have amazing technical beings amongst us—guys that have just given their lives to the fulfilment of what they do in audio, lighting, video. These are people that could walk into any television station, any event in the world, and just be geniuses at it. They make you at a live event feel that amazing empathy or that emotion. It can make

you laugh, it can make you cry, it can make you sing, and we are missing that at the moment. We are missing those people. They have nowhere to go with their skill set. We are losing them because they have to provide for their families. When this industry resets—and if it does—we are going to be at the point of 18 to 20 months of people not working. Are we going to get them back? Can we safely put this industry back on its feet with that lack of expertise, that lack of experience that is gone? I do not know.

We put our hand up to everything that happens in society. One event in this country for the bushfires that Michael Gudinski organised raised \$150 million that went back to society. Have we seen that amount of money back to us? Not a chance. The film industry get COVID insurance cover. Do we get that? No. Bluesfest got cancelled a day out. The layers of humanity that disappeared out of that that have not got a gig—their families are crying for some help. It is just amazing, and it is relentless, you know? When any of you have been to a show at a major stadium and seen five people on stage, do you have any idea of how many people backstage put that together? Do you know? It is 1000 people. There are 1000 jobs. There are hotel rooms, there are car hires, there are caterers. There are all those other allied industries that are making money out of this. We are hurting. We need help. That is it.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Howard. It has been great insight from all of you. Because we have got so many committee members present here today I have created a bit of a list, so I will go Ms Lovell, Ms Watt, then Mr Davis, myself, Bev and then Tim. I will ask committee members to limit themselves to two questions because the witnesses have been fantastic. So, Wendy, if you would like to go first.

Ms LOVELL: Okay, no worries. Thank you very much for your presentations, and you have really covered off on the hardships that you have suffered through COVID-19 and also the lack of support. I am just wondering if you can please tell us now what the barriers are to the industry re-establishing and starting up having events again. Also you said you have not had any meetings with the Department of Health, but has there been a dialogue with you around how you can safely start up events? Also just a little bit about—you touched on no insurance et cetera and the cancellation of Bluesfest—what that does to the confidence of the industry and what should be done by government to give you the confidence you can run events. So those are my questions all in one.

Mr THEWLIS: I am happy to kick that off. As far as barriers to events happening again, there is a number. One of them is that a lot of people cannot afford to risk the financial loss of cancellation. You have all seen the Bluesfest example; we do not need to cover that. But if you are a not-for-profit who does one conference a year and that raises money for your operations, you might make \$50 000 out of that conference. If that conference is cancelled at the last minute, your not-for-profit might lose \$100 000. Therefore there are a huge number of not-for-profits who just cannot risk losing 100 grand, because they do not have a lazy 100 grand lying around. And that goes right through the system, even up to major corporate events. Losing 500 grand on an event is not going to send a major retail chain broke, but there are not many companies out there who are willing to put that much money out there and at the last minute potentially get nothing. So the fact that you cannot currently insure against that loss is a huge barrier.

Another barrier is just the level of confidence in the market. People are scared to do things, particularly in the corporate sector, because it might be viewed to be the wrong thing to be doing. People are also concerned that all of the regulations and approval processes are really complicated. As an example, there was one major music festival which got quite a bit of attention down on the Mornington Peninsula a number of weeks ago. They got their public event framework approval as the trucks were coming in to set up the event. So they were putting up I guess something like a million dollars to do an event, and they were not approved until the trucks were on site. Had they not got their approval, they would have lost everything. So just this idea that it is okay to approve events a week or two before the event happens—no responsible person will take a financial risk where they are just at the mercy of people that you cannot even ring up because you can only converse by email about your approval. So there are a number of layers like that, which is just making it really difficult for people to be willing to take that risk.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Simon. I know Tiny and Howard might want to add to that.

Mr GOOD: Victoria is the hardest state in Australia to do an event in. The layers of local, state and federal government compliance to do an event in Victoria are horrendous. Probably 60 per cent of the events that are planned in Victoria do not go ahead because the event producer does not know or cannot cope with navigating the layers of compliance that are required. How do we get this thing going again? Everybody in Australia—all

the politicians—needs to get together and stop bickering. Get yourselves on the same page, open the borders, get people vaccinated, fix the insurance and bring the confidence back to the industry. We do not work in Victoria. The entertainment industry, the event industry, does not work in Victoria. We work in Australia. We work overseas. There is zero confidence for people to do events in Victoria at the moment because the possibility of getting locked down, locked out or slammed into quarantine for 14 days means that there is another layer of financial commitment. I mean, the crew go to Victoria to do one day's event and go back to Queensland into 14 days of quarantine that they have to fund. So they earned \$600 and they got a \$3500 bill from the Queensland government purely because they came to Victoria to do one day's work.

Mr FREEMAN: Victoria prides itself on being the event capital of Australia. Victoria needs to now drive on a national basis a national discussion around some COVID compliance document, something that has got a level playing field from state to state. I am not prepared to work with a promoter and send 14 trucks to Western Australia with a crew when, if there is a lockdown, that is going to cost that promoter \$600 000 for those two weeks.

Mr DAVIS: They are stranded there. They are stranded.

Mr FREEMAN: You are gutted; you have got nothing. Absolutely stranded is what I am saying. And that level of confidence has disappeared nationally. This industry, live music, works on travel and movement. I can leave Adelaide on a Friday night and be doing a show in Perth on Sunday, but I have got two drivers in every truck. I have got 14 trucks. I have got 28 drivers. I have got 90 crew. I have got 130 hotel rooms. I have got 100 seats on a plane. The spend is huge. So to be stuck somewhere and then reschedule your other shows on the off chance that you can find a venue that can take the rescheduling—the nightmare is continuous. The confidence in the industry—we are smashed at the moment.

Mr GOOD: Just recently I was supposed to deliver a show for the Adelaide Festival. We had loaded a truck; I was ready to drive. The Thursday was when the Victorian government announced the circuit-breaker. Immediately all of my travel documents into South Australia were cancelled because I lived in Melbourne. We delivered the event because that is what we do. I hired drivers from interstate. I hired crew from interstate. And I left those people in South Australia for two weeks because I could not afford to bring any of the equipment back to Victoria because I might not have got the trucks and the crew back there to do the load-out. We lost \$38 000 straight out of our account, and, thank you very much to the government, we got \$2500 back. That is the reality of what border closures and lockdowns and circuit-breakers are to our industry, and, as a private small business, that is kicking us in the hip pocket, it is kicking the crew in the hip pocket and it is completely undermining any confidence in doing what we do.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Tiny. I might pass over to Ms Watt, because I know she had a question especially in relation to the live music industry.

Ms WATT: Yes. So can I just thank you all for your contributions today and just say that I have certainly benefited—I think the culture of Victoria has certainly benefited—from all your good works over many, many years, and so thank you so much for that. I have only been in this gig six months, and before that I was on JobKeeper, so I absolutely understand when you are talking about the terrifying feeling of what life might look like after JobKeeper. I am not currently on JobKeeper, but I am interested to know how the industry will be impacted now by the stopping of JobKeeper. What will this actually mean for organisations? What are your members talking about? Some planning around that and insights on that I think would be enormously helpful.

Mr THEWLIS: I can tell you that the top line number is that we expect about 40 per cent of businesses to close and another 43 per cent to shed their staff. The other guys can talk about—

Mr FREEMAN: That is in three months.

Mr THEWLIS: Yes. The other guys can talk about the real job losses that are actually happening today.

Mr GOOD: The majority of small businesses that I talk to every day have roughly 25 per cent of the staff full time and about 10 per cent of the casual staff that they had prior to COVID.

Mr FREEMAN: I have got business owners who are friends of mine, mates for years, who are now paying their staff off their credit cards, who are selling their houses that they have worked all their lives for. That is the reality of losing JobKeeper. That is the reality of where we are. And in turn, one individual business might

employ casually 200 to 300 people at an event, because they are the numbers you need to drive these events. It does not exist anymore, so there are 200 or 300 people who have not got a dollar in their pocket as well.

Mr GOOD: The toll on mental health of business owners, having to bring in 10 people that have been their friends and colleagues—honestly, in my part and most parts of our industry we trust our lives to these people. I am walking around on the roof of Etihad Stadium, 37 metres in the air with a harness on, hoping that if I go over the edge somebody else is going to pull me back. I have had to tell 10 people that they are out of work. I cannot pay them. They have got nothing. We have gone through JobKeeper. We have gone through cash. We have gone through all of our reserves. We have got no work to give them. We cannot keep them. I cannot keep these people if I have got nothing to pay them with.

Ms LOVELL: But the reality is—

Mr GOOD: But the reality is I have to sit there—I am sorry—and face to face tell this person that I do not know how they are going to pay their rent or if they are going to be homeless tomorrow, and to do that over and over again is—

Ms LOVELL: But the reality is the government finding a way for your industry to start up full time again rather than keeping you on JobKeeper. JobKeeper is just a stopgap; it is the industry starting up that is going to—

Mr DAVIS: You want to work.

Mr GOOD: Absolutely. All of the guys want to work. They do not want a handout. They do not want to be on—

Ms LOVELL: Not JobKeeper.

Mr GOOD: No, or JobSeeker. We want to work.

Mr DAVIS: We want the creative spirits running and you actually doing something—

Mr FREEMAN: We want to share what we do. We want to present.

Ms LOVELL: And we want to benefit from it. We love it. We love you.

Mr FREEMAN: Yes. We want to get 60 000 of you at an event and make you smile and make you dance and make you sing and get the mask off and see your face.

The CHAIR: This is all very informative, but what I—

Mr THEWLIS: Certainly the one critical thing there is how we get businesses from today to September, October, November, and that is money coming into businesses. If there is no money coming in, a lot just will not survive and a lot of jobs are just gone. It is just that simple.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Simon. I might, because I am acutely aware of the time, give to Mr Davis, and then I will have a go after.

Mr DAVIS: I understand the terrible point that we are at now, but essentially what you are telling us is you want the industry opened up safely. Forgive me if I am paraphrasing what you have told us, but so we are clear: you want to open up the industry, you want to work, you do not want the barriers in the way—the complex forms and the complex approval processes. I think you said we are the hardest state to do an event in. So we want that swept aside and a simple set of approvals in place so that people can get approvals and they can plan into the future. Is that the first key point that people want?

Mr FREEMAN: Correct. To be treated with the same respect that the sporting industry is treated with. We are talking about the same numbers at venues. Why do we have to go through seven hoops and they just roll through one?

Mr DAVIS: And ratios that make it uneconomic and so forth, and the hardest ratios are in Victoria compared to anywhere else in the country.

Mr FREEMAN: Correct.

Mr THEWLIS: In Queensland event organisers sit down and work with their local department of health person to talk through their projects. In Melbourne, as an industry we have never met, so we just want to actually sit in a room and come up with guidelines and restrictions that actually work, that are safe and that let events happen.

Mr DAVIS: Then you also are asking for a special section of the department that would focus on events. So there would be Events Vic or whatever name it was given and it would focus specifically on your industry to ensure the industry is not forgotten in future.

Mr THEWLIS: Absolutely. At the moment there is not one single person I deal with at DJPR—and I have never met the secretary, but most people down—who has a really good knowledge of our industry, how it works and what it is about, because their focus is tourism or it is sport or it is other areas. So we are on a hiding to nothing because it is not their job to support our industry and it is not their expertise. So we want an area where it is their job to know about our industry and it is their job—

Mr FREEMAN: And we have no head; we have no lead.

Mr DAVIS: It seems to me—forgive me for paraphrasing because I just want to get this very crystal clear—you are wanting several other things as well. One is a way forward with insurance and the state government to step forward and help with COVID insurance. You can get fire insurance or whatever other insurance, but you cannot get insurance that enables you to recover something if the event goes south because of COVID.

Mr FREEMAN: Correct. The film industry has that; we do not.

Mr DAVIS: Yes, we need some. And you also need some way forward that enables the complex sequence of approvals to go forward and specific money to support the back-of-house things that you are talking about. You have got the leasing of a building with \$4.5 million worth of equipment and there is no support from anyone for that ongoing lease whilst you are in hibernation, effectively. That is right, isn't it?

Mr GOOD: Yes, that is correct.

Mr DAVIS: So you need money there—specific money—you need insurance help and you need the way cleared with all these ridiculous restrictions that are not grounded in reality because they are harder here than in every other state.

Mr FREEMAN: Correct. Absolutely.

Mr DAVIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that. I have just got a couple of questions of my own. Tiny, it was great to hear about the pro bono work your sector in particular and all of you do to raise funds whenever there is a natural disaster or any other event to show solidarity with fellow Victorians. I found that very touching and it is very important to the state, the amount that you give back. But I did have a question: what do you think is the most effective mechanism or thing that the government could do going forward in terms of direct support. You gave an example of the circuit breaker. I know the government did release I think it was over \$100 million at that time to small businesses, but what is the single biggest factor going forward?

Mr GOOD: Getting the borders open and keeping them open, getting people vaccinated and sorting the insurance so we can all get back to work. To paraphrase it into a single thing: give confidence back to the world that we are an industry and we are open for business. That is the one thing.

Vaccines and insurance and all of these other things are things that can help, and certainly I understand the political pressures around this, but the one thing is to keep us open for business. Allow us to do what we do and get us back to work so that we are not asking for money. We are asking to do what we do to get us back to work and to get the guys working again.

The CHAIR: Maybe Simon or Howard might know: is there any COVID insurance cover in any other jurisdiction that you could point to? In Australia is there any state that is providing that?

Mr GOOD: The film industry.

The CHAIR: They are for different sectors, you are saying.

Mr GOOD: Yes.

Mr THEWLIS: For the film industry you pay 1 per cent of your budget, and that gives you COVID coverage. It is done through the two main insurers for the film industry, which are Sura and Allianz. So when you take out your cancellation insurance the federal government is underwriting the COVID component of that. Similarly after 9/11, and we all lived through events after 9/11, the federal government set up the Australian Reinsurance Pool Corporation. The federal government did a guarantee of \$10 billion and then put a levy on insurers so that now that organisation underwrites or reinsures, depending on the technical term, all terrorism risk for insurance policies in Australia. So they are two of the models. The Victorian model—obviously there are building surveyors, and after the cladding stuff happened they stepped in. It is being worked on in Germany, in Denmark. It is still going backwards and forwards in the UK, but it is something that is being discussed in nearly every jurisdiction around the world, because it is a universal problem. In some ways the simplest way of looking at it is: would you let one of your staff drive a car that was not insured? The risk might not be that high for a car accident, but the consequences are severe. So even if it is only a 1 per cent chance that your event might be cancelled, if everyone is losing their house, that is a really, really serious risk, and 1 per cent is a lot more than a car accident.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Simon and Tiny. I understand that the confidence aspect is not just the epidemiological aspect, the vaccine rollout and the community uncertainty but also the insurance, the financial risk, being managed too. So I understand that.

Mr THEWLIS: It is certainly the financial risk and just helping businesses to keep paying their bills for the next six months, because if there is confidence back tomorrow and gigs start happening tomorrow, the suppliers will not see a bean until about three months time, four months time, five months time.

Mr DAVIS: That is the lead time.

Mr THEWLIS: That is the lead time, because they will not see a bean until the event happens. On Friday the convention bureau announced some grants of up to 25 grand to support multiday conferences with more than 30 per cent of people from interstate, which is a good help. Queensland is doing 85 grand, by the by. But that money is not actually going to get down to the people who are doing it the toughest—the suppliers and the workers—for three, four, five, maybe six months, because multiday conferences do not get organised in a week. So it is looking at the direct measures until events happen, because no matter what we do today, it is still months down the track that those dollars actually get into people's pockets and help them pay their rent and put food on the table.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Simon. I know Mrs McArthur has got a couple of questions, and then Mr Tim Quilty. Bev.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you very much, gentlemen, for your comprehensive presentation. I have been certainly impressed by today's presentation but also by the representations I have received personally from members of your organisation. The fact that the events industry is not recognised as an industry is a disgrace, and we need to do something about that. But I think one thing that you have impressed upon us is the fact that we have got to be one Australia and not a series of fiefdoms where premiers act as emperors and close down borders with very little notice, affecting not only your industry but so many industries. I am also incredibly impressed to hear about the extraordinary level of expertise and experience that your members have in running complex events and the supply chains, the logistics, the staff management and the public interaction that is involved, and I find it extraordinary that in this state, where we have done so badly in managing this pandemic—worse than any other state—this talent pool that exists in your industry has not been utilised. Could you have managed hotel quarantine, testing and tracing, the lockdown of the towers? How would you have been employed and deployed in managing this state and its pandemic better with the skills and expertise that you offer?

Mr FREEMAN: In answer to your question, Beverley, just quickly, at the start of the COVID pandemic CrewCare put together a 30-page document offering to build temporary medical clinics adjoining hospitals in parklands. We take venues of one purpose and change them into venues of another purpose, and then we give

them back when we are done with them. We have the ability to put together temporary medical clinics. That went to every health minister in Australia, federal and state. We did not even get a pat on the head or a kick up the arse for that, thanks very much. We would have done it well. Thank you.

Mr THEWLIS: I mean, it was horrific watching the Flemington towers thing pan out and it take three days to get infrastructure in place, because what our industry does is you make half a dozen phone calls and there will be marquees, there will be power, there will be toilet facilities, there will be people to go door to door to check on supplies and things, people to distribute goods—all of that sort of stuff. It is not that we have transferable skills, but that is all stuff that we do day to day. We build little cities in an instant. Look at hotel quarantine and its delicate issues. I will not wade in too far, but getting large groups of people from aeroplanes to hotels—culturally mixed, some with security risks—getting them checked in, monitoring all of their dietary requirements and all of their other needs, keeping track of them, all that stuff, I mean, that—

Mrs McARTHUR: That is your day job.

Mr THEWLIS: is what professional conference organisers do—

Mr FREEMAN: It is what I do for a living.

Mr THEWLIS: day in, day out. I mean, if we do a large conference, we will have people based in the hotel to be the interface, to make sure that everything happens, to make sure that all the dietary requirements are followed, because 30 per cent of your punters on an event will have a dietary requirement, I can assure you. And then similarly with security operations, that is what we do. We have a long way to go in this pandemic, but there is this bunch of people—we have serious risk-management skills, we have serious contingency planning skills, we have amazing logistics skills. I mean, you can ask Howard about touring André Rieu with 125 semitrailers going around the country. That is logistics. It is not building a little support thing for Flemington. It is not building a temporary vaccination centre. So we have a massive skill set there and massive resources as an industry, and that is what we do.

Mrs McARTHUR: So above all else your industry could have actually helped Victoria in ensuring that we did not have 800 deaths resulting from hotel quarantine. That is your sort of work. You could have been kept employed.

Mr GOOD: Not only could we, we stuck our hand up over and over and over again and very rarely even got acknowledgement that we were standing there. Howard, how long did it take to move Falls Festival a few years ago when we had the bushfires and we had to evacuate that site?

Mr FREEMAN: We took a venue that was built to accommodate 30 000 people and we moved it overnight and played the following day with 40 acts on a stage that we built in a paddock, in a hay shed. We have the ability to do that. We will not stop. We pride ourselves on our ability to think on our feet and get results.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you are not only on your knees, your skills have been wasted throughout this entire year in this pandemic. That is a tragedy.

The CHAIR: Thank you for all that. I might pass over to Mr Quilty because I know he is eager to ask a question.

Mr QUILTY: Okay. Some of my questions have already been answered or asked. Are there any specific measures that you think could be put into play to support small players and regional players in the industry? Other than simplifying approval processes, is there anything else that can be done for the small players and the regional players?

Mr THEWLIS: I think they are in a similar situation to most businesses, but it is probably harsher financially because they are starting from a much lower base. So I guess I would again be saying there needs to be the financial support to them, and just make the processes much, much simpler so those events can start happening again. The process, I know, is very Melbourne focused, it is very focused on big organisations who have the ability to deal with a vast amount of stuff. I have spent nine months dealing with the government and I struggle with some of the regulations, so smaller events operators in regional centres, I mean, they will just struggle. It has to be simpler, and it can be much simpler without compromising on any safety or health things.

Mr GOOD: The rural councils pretty much take the lead from the Melbourne council and from the Victorian government, so they are immediately on a six to 12-week lag on policy changes that happen here in Melbourne as to what gets rolled out in the rural communities, not to mention the fact that there are small businesses that do events in each one of these rural centres. However, the majority of their crews rely on being able to bring people in from other regions, equipment in from other regions. So as soon as you put a block between moving stuff from, say, East Gippsland over to the western regions, that whole process becomes incredibly much more difficult.

The CHAIR: Tim, did you have another question?

Mr QUILTY: No, that is good.

The CHAIR: I will allow one final question because Ms Lovell—

Ms LOVELL: It is okay, Mr Davis covered off on it.

The CHAIR: Excellent. On that point I just want to actually thank all of you for your insightful presentations. I found it very informative. It was an interesting perspective. I did want to say that I know I have actually got a few more questions on my mind that have come up from this presentation. If the committee wanted to write to any of you about a specific issue, would you be happy to get back to us?

Mr FREEMAN: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. The secretariat will note that.

Mr GOOD: I will even buy the coffee.

The CHAIR: No, no, no.

Mr DAVIS: The other thing too is if, as the inquiry proceeds, there is material that comes around the events sector that you think you can elucidate, you should not be afraid to add supplementary comments.

Mr THEWLIS: Certainly the key thing for us is that you are hearing from three of us today who are at the absolute front line. At about 2.30 today I think you have got Lawrie and Peter from Phaseshift and Rocky from ExpoNet, so those are two other really good events businesses, and that is all you have heard from so far. Then I believe you are off for three days on tourism. We are a big, complicated industry. We will keep putting in recommendations of the many other businesspeople that you should be talking to to give you a really good understanding. One of the reasons why our industry has suffered is because it is people who know very little about our industry making big decisions about us, and we do not want you to join that group. There are many good people in our industry who can tell their stories. I will go as far as saying it was quite emotional when this inquiry was announced, because our industry had never been listened to through all of this. We have been shut up, we have been fobbed off. So just getting members of our industry in front of you to actually be allowed to tell their stories is critically important.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Simon and Howard and Tiny. Like I said, we will get an opportunity to speak to the relevant departments in due course, but again, we will now take a short break before our next witness.

Mr FREEMAN: I would just like to finish with: the only growth that we have seen in our industry in the last 12 months has been with the suicide helpline. That has gone up 135 per cent. This is about human beings.

Ms LOVELL: Absolutely.

Mr FREEMAN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Simon. Thank you, Howard and Tiny. We will be in contact with you shortly.

Witnesses withdrew.