

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the tourism and events sectors**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 19 May 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 Jon Perring, Co-owner, Tote Hotel and Bar Open (*in person*); and

Mr Matt Jones, Managing Director, NW Group (*via videoconference*).

**The CHAIR:** The Economy and Infrastructure Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors continues. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that any 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.

My name is Enver Erdogan, and I am Chair of the committee. I would like to introduce my fellow committee members: Mr Gepp, Mr Quilty, Mr Barton, Mr Tarlamis, Ms Lovell, Mr Davis and Mrs McArthur.

To witnesses appearing before the committee, I will just read out a short statement. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the 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 I ask that they be kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Could you please begin by stating your name for the benefit of our Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you, Jon and Matt.

**Mr PERRING:** Jon Perring. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee. I am co-owner and director of dedicated live music venues the Tote Hotel and Bar Open. I have been running venues for 22 years. Prior to the COVID lockdown in March 2020 we staged approximately 4000 gigs a year. We are now at about 30 per cent of gig activity and revenues compared to pre-COVID times. The music industry has never been more precarious.

I was going to talk about restricted capacities and the effect on live music venues in particular. Although still a significant issue for medium-sized venues with band rooms with prepandemic working capacities of about 300 to 1000, small venues now operate closer to their prepandemic capacities. Instead I wish to highlight both process failings of government in engagement with the industry and the consequences of these failings and other areas of need and friction that are likely to be problematic in the near future as we head to more normalised times.

The Live Music Roundtable was established by the Victorian government in, I believe, 2011 by the then Liberal Baillieu government as an initiative following from the live music accord signed between the music industry and the previous Labor Brumby government. The work of the Live Music Roundtable has been substantial and was supported by both sides of politics, and it sat until the beginning of the pandemic. It has not sat since and has no plan to as far as I am aware. I should declare that I was a signatory to both live music accords and also a long-time member of the Live Music Roundtable in a volunteer and unpaid capacity.

The result of this stasis has been that the industry has had no opportunity for formal dialogue with government, the direct result being that the music industry has had to resort to holding that conversation in the media. We have advocated through Music Victoria and created campaigns through Save Our Scene, a collective of like-minded live music venues. The issues that emerged and the government responses were the much-needed emergency financial support for live music venue core funding, which resulted in the live music venues grant, and the introduction of the concept of live music precincts in the Victorian planning provisions to better spatially clarify where the agent-of-change principle is applied to live music venues to protect live music venues from opportunistic development whilst venues are uneconomic and undervalued land use, recognising and thus protecting the live music performance infrastructure's irreplaceable cultural value.

In November 2020, when inside gigs were again allowed, there were ridiculous regulatory health constraints placed on live music performance that effectively prevented live music from being staged. The audience had to be spaced 5 metres in front of the performers, who were to be masked and spaced 2 metres apart. Lobbying ultimately removed these mandatory unworkable regulations after three weeks, and the situation could have been avoided through consultation. The delay meant that bands were not being programmed prior to the Christmas break, resulting in a delay of six to eight weeks in staging gigs, further financially injuring live music venues. Finally, there was lobbying by Music Victoria and SOS around the removal of the one-person-per-2-square-metre rule for venues with spaces up to 400 square metres, which now comes into law on 29 May. Thankfully government in each case listened to the industry, but in each case it has unnecessarily brought live music venues to the brink. This is hardly an orderly plan for the return of the music industry to COVID normal. This precarity and angst imposed on the industry could have so easily been avoided if the pan-government forum Live Music Roundtable designed for consultation and to address regulatory impact and reform had met and done its job.

I believe this is a major failing of the department of creative industries, who chairs this forum, and of government leadership more generally. If ever there was a time for a forum such as the Live Music Roundtable to step up, engage and lead, this was it and still is. Of course there remain many critically important issues that affect the live music industry, the art form and its practitioners, audience and workers. These require attention by government and, if ignored, will again be ventilated in the public domain and wreak avoidable collateral damage on a weakened community and industry.

Some of these issues that need addressing by the Victorian government are and will be as follows.

Fund and commission research. This is needed to look at the impact the COVID pandemic has had on the Victorian live music economy, its audience, practitioners and businesses, and its infrastructure. Such research should be on prepandemic and post-lockdown activity; audience size; impact on artists, their practice and incomes; venue numbers; show numbers; overall economic activity; overall sector size; audience engagement; the impediments to growth and survival; and the impact on live music festivals and touring and the business and labour forces that support them. The Music Victoria live music census, last carried out in 2017, is now overdue, and there has not been a vigorous Victorian industry study since 2011—*The Economic, Social and Cultural Contribution of Venue-Based Live Music in Victoria*, Deloitte Access Economics, 2011.

Facilitate the development of a recovery plan to return the live music industry back to viability and health, including actionable recommendations and targeted industry assistance where needed in conjunction with the music industry and led by Music Victoria.

Return capacities to all live music venues, independent of band room size, so that they are able to operate at prepandemic standing group capacities greater than one patron per 2 square metres, not just venues with less than 400 square metres or greater than 1000-patron capacity.

Action the development of agreed music industry protocols for future lockdown shutdowns and the ramp-up back to full venue capacities in the shortest possible time. Building such protocols will avoid the current ad hoc approach the government adopts now and the necessity for industry to second-guess and lobby to correct ill-conceived health regulations.

Ensure the consistency of health regulations for live music venues and festivals and that they are consistent with other industries, such as sport. Ensure the regulations affecting live music venues are announced at the same time as other industries, such as sport, and not treat the music industry as an afterthought.

Address the impact on the availability and price of insurance for live music venues and festivals, in particular public liability and business interruption insurance. The government needs to adopt policies to lower risks or underwrite policies.

Monitor the impact of the EPA's new environmental noise regulations and protocols, in particular their effect on outdoor venues, festivals and events in urban environments. Due to the one-size-fits-all nature of the preset dB limits of the EPA permit system, the industry fears that many events and festivals will become non-compliant and unviable under the new regulations. In the COVID environment, outdoor shows should not be made impossible or impractical to stage. On the contrary, outdoor live music should become a policy priority.

Create and enable border permits for musicians, their teams and crews to re-establish confidence and encourage national tours by artists at all levels.

Set up a specific forum to explore solutions and address artists' and musicians' economic sustainability, including what is needed for the establishment of a specific industry superannuation scheme and access to social security or income insurance for musicians, artists, crew and other music industry gig-economy workers. Government leadership in this policy area is desperately needed, and approaches and policy solutions need to be thought through. A viable music industry worth in excess of \$1 billion in Victoria cannot be sustained without sustainable careers for musicians and artists, and I believe this to be the elephant in the room.

And finally, re-establish a renewed Live Music Roundtable, with new terms of reference, to be located under the Department of Premier and Cabinet or alternatively in the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, as it appears Creative Victoria have dropped the ball by neglecting to run and chair the Live Music Roundtable. The Live Music Roundtable's agenda should be drawn from the above points but also with wide consultation. Such a pan-government music industry format is required to redress the economic and social damage that has been wreaked on both the music community and the industry alike. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that, Jon. I have got Matt Jones, Managing Director of NW Group. Matt, if you could just introduce yourself and give us a short presentation, please. Thank you for joining us live via Zoom.

**Mr JONES:** Look, thanks for having me. My name is Matt Jones. I am Managing Director of NW Group. I just wanted to check: can you hear me okay?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Mr JONES:** Great. The NW Group: we provide sound, lighting and video equipment and technicians to the live event industry. So we operate a couple of brands in Melbourne: Norwest and Haycom. Every year NW Group provides technical support to hundreds of live events in Victoria across corporate, theatre, worship, live sport, concert and festival markets. So if it is a live event, we can be involved. Our business has been operating since as early as the late 70s, and I have been Managing Director of the NW Group for the last 15 years.

We have played a critical role in the production of many of Victoria's iconic annual and large one-off shows or events such as the Australian Open, the Melbourne International Arts Festival, the International Comedy Festival, the AFL Grand Final, the Commonwealth Games opening and closing ceremonies and, believe it or not, the international convention of Jehovah's Witnesses at Etihad, which I understand took the record at Etihad for attendance from the AC/DC concert a few years prior. Who would have thought?

As we speak, we have got a technical crew, predominantly from Melbourne—so a Melbourne-based crew—quarantining in a Tokyo hotel. We have got a couple of containers en route to Tokyo to provide sound and broadcast services for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Tokyo Olympic Games. I make some of the points of these shows to sort of emphasise that Australia and Victoria in particular have an international reputation for their skill sets in the live events industry, and all of us should be immensely proud of that and very focused on preserving that position that we are so privileged to have and so much work has gone into establishing.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19 we employed around 210 full-time staff, and we would have anything up to an additional 200 or more casual and contract crew across six branches in Australia and New Zealand at any given time. Our revenues in 2019 were approximately \$50 million per annum. Business events made up around 75 per cent of that, and the balance was in arts, entertainment and sport. So that just shows some of the variety of the sorts of events that we are talking about. It is not just music; it is not just sports. There is a very large component of business event activity that is contributing economic growth to Victoria obviously as well, and we are pleased to be a part of that.

In Melbourne we employed around 30 full-time staff prior to COVID, and again a similar number of casual and freelance technicians. Like everyone you have heard from, in March 2020 our revenues were wiped out completely. At the beginning of the pandemic we sort of mapped out in our teams what we thought the four stages of our recovery would look like, and we called these 'survive', 'recover', 'revive' and 'thrive'. The key

metrics we have sort of been measuring through the last 14 months were the number of staff we were able to get back to full-time employment, and that was our biggest focus, and of course absolutely interlinked in that was our revenue pipeline recovery.

‘Survive’, just to give you an idea, meant revenues were less than 10 per cent of prepandemic levels, and for much of the period from March to October our revenues in Melbourne were less than 5 per cent of what we had been trading at. ‘Recover’ meant those revenues would have increased from 10 to 50 per cent—in other words, half or less. Now, we operate in six markets: Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Auckland and Wellington. Victoria was the last of our markets to move out of ‘survive’. It did so, I think, in January–February. So in January–February we moved ahead of 10 per cent of the revenues that we had been running at, and it is the only business that remains at ‘recover’ while all other businesses in our company at least have now moved to ‘revive’. I want to make this point clearly because to reiterate: Victoria—the event capital of Australia, which we are all so proud of—has been our slowest market to recover. Other states have actually done this better than Victoria, and I would love to think we could change that as we move forward.

My industry colleagues, including Lawrie Videky, Howard Freeman, Tiny Good and Simon Thewlis and my learned colleague on the other side of the table here, have really outlined to you the incredible impact on their business of COVID and of course the restrictions imposed as a result of COVID. And, look, simply put: the pandemic and those event restrictions have been devastating for our people, our clients and our shareholders—and most of those shareholders, just like me, also work in our business and rely on it for their livelihoods.

Rather than spend a lot of time today talking about what has happened over the past 12 months—I think we can all see that there is some kind of recovery coming—I wanted to give you some insight into what it is like to operate in our market now. As over coming months you see shows emerge and you think, ‘Well, the market’s coming back’, I want you to understand what it is like at the moment to operate a business in the event sector in Victoria. Perhaps the best way I can do that is through a couple of events that we have been lucky enough to complete over the past four or five weeks.

We are delighted to be providing technical support for TEG’s current tour of *PAW Patrol*. If you have not been, grab some tickets for your children. The first show was scheduled for Perth. It was about four weeks ago, I think. We had two semitrailers of equipment en route from Melbourne to Perth when, as we all remember, a couple of weeks ago Perth called a snap lockdown. The Perth show was postponed. It was originally cancelled; it has now been postponed. The semitrailers had to turn away midway between Melbourne and Perth. The crew booked had to be paid for; the logistics costs and the accommodation had to be covered. We have now got to reschedule crew and logistics for a show which, luckily, will happen later next month but with all the associated costs of that on top.

During the same period we had a large AGM for Rio Tinto. This was also held over in Perth, a couple of weeks back, once again with a highly skilled Melbourne- or Victorian-based crew operating it. This show was designed to proceed under almost any level of restriction, from fully live to fully virtual. To ensure our team was on the ground and we could make this happen, and knowing the situation that we are facing at the moment, we needed to send them across two weeks beforehand. There was not anything to do; they just had to go across for two weeks. We had to accommodate them for that period. We could not risk the chance that quarantining might be reimposed. Some of you will recall that at that stage we were starting to feel quite good—that it might not be. And then of course we had the latest lockdown over in Perth. Fortunately the show got to go ahead. It was in full virtual mode, but we were actually able to deliver it. As our crew returned from Perth to Melbourne they were then required to be tested and isolate for 72 hours due to Perth being an orange zone. Now, I understand that at the time Victoria was the last state to require isolation and testing coming back out of Perth, taking almost a week longer than other states. Had Victoria followed the approach of other states, those staff would not have had to have isolated for the additional three days. There was also, just out of interest, no testing available at the airport, so crew needed to travel to Heidelberg to get their test—just some little examples of how we could maybe think about making things easier for all of us to get business back up and running.

As mentioned earlier, we have got eight technicians, just about all of them out of Melbourne, currently in isolation in, by the sounds of it, a not particularly lovely hotel in Tokyo. The approval process to get consent for these staff to leave Australia and enter Tokyo included a letter of invitation, a certificate of eligibility, a written pledge by the Olympic organising committee, sponsorship by our client—as inviting company—a travel schedule and 14 days of health-check data in the lead-up to travel. I could go on and on, on this list. I am not

going to bore you other than to say we are still awaiting confirmation that we have actually got quarantine facilities for these guys when they come back home in four months time when the event is completed.

In summary, our operating environment is vastly improved from that of 12 months ago, when our revenue was zero. However, let us not forget our turnover in Victoria remains between 10 and 50 per cent—significantly less than half—of pre-COVID levels more than 14 months on. Despite that, we are already seeing skills shortages emerge as skilled technicians have left our industry in droves to go and find more stable work, and it is really as yet unknown whether those staff are going to actually return to the industry. We continue to face the high risk of event cancellation at any time for any snap lockdowns—not just in Victoria but, as you have heard described, in other states. We have seen a huge increase in compliance costs and substantial quarantine requirements, and the mental health aspects of those are weighing heavily on our staff. You can imagine what it is like sitting in a hotel room for two weeks in Tokyo with very poor food, and obviously we are having to supplement that by bringing it in. I think you will agree these are substantial barriers to trading even though we are seeing a slow reopening.

I hope these examples also illustrate to you Victoria has world-class capability in the events sector, and the Victorian event industry is deriving its income not just from Victoria but interstate and internationally. I make all these points not to suggest that the requirements around COVID are unreasonable or unnecessary to manage the COVID risk—we understand that of course. But I need you to understand that even as we see a gradual reopening of the events sector and you see more shows upcoming, our industry continues to face existential challenges that are disproportionate to other sectors—most other sectors, almost all other sectors.

I am hugely optimistic that demand for events will eventually return to prepandemic levels and be a vibrant part of Australia's economy. But if Victoria is going to take advantage of that and retain our position as Australia's arts and events capital, we need government support and for it to provide support to this sector through this intervening period until international borders reopen, whenever that is, to ensure that when they do and the market bounces back—because it will—the infrastructure required to deliver these incredible events, which Melbourne is so famous for and of which my company is just one tiny part of the supply chain, and that supply chain exist when the demand returns.

I think this support could take the form of a couple of things. Confirmation that any future lockdowns would trigger some form of JobKeeper subsidy of \$750 a week for both permanent and casual employees—that gives staff confidence to remain within the sector and businesses confidence to continue to retain those staff while we wait for the recovery. Targeted industry apprenticeship schemes whereby the cost of new employees is subsidised for the first 12 months to assist with the rebuild of the industry. As I mentioned, we have lost a lot of the talent that existed. Some may come back. Fortunately the vast majority, as we know through our employment statistics, have been able to find re-employment elsewhere, but that is not going to help us when we try to get our events sector back up and running at full pace. Targeted employment subsidies for new hires in the events sector to give confidence to employers to rehire and invest, and targeted ongoing financial support and/or resources for organisations such as CrewCare and Support Act to address the mental health issues emerging in the sector and raise awareness of these services—and I thought Howard Freeman displayed and explained that situation very, very well in his submission a few weeks back. We need simplification of the processes for travelling interstate and internationally and flexibility in snap lockdown scenarios for the situations I have described.

The final point I would like to make is that the funding provided to date to the sector, both in terms of the business events grant program and RISE funding, are a very welcome boost to the sector, and we are already seeing events come through as a result of that, which is fantastic. However, certainly from our perspective and my conversations with my industry peers and colleagues, this funding is not making its way through the events supply chain in the form of deposits for future events, so what we would suggest is that an awareness campaign and/or directives around what is required from those funding recipients should be looked at and in particular they must distribute a percentage of funding grants made to the events sector to the events supply chain in the form of deposits for future events. That would be a welcome addition to the funding approvals from our perspective. I would like to close by thanking in particular Simon Thewlis and Save Vic Events for their leadership and advocacy for our sector and by thanking you all for listening to me.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Jones, for that comprehensive overview, specifically of your events business but also the sector more broadly. I might hand over to Mr Barton, Mr Quilty, then Mr Davis, and then we will

go through the rest of the team. Can I remind committee members to just ask one question first, and if we get a chance we will go to a second question. Mr Barton.

**Mr BARTON:** Since the Chair is putting very tight limits on us, what can we do? You had a very broad range of things you would like to see—like in terms of restructuring the industry—but what is the number one thing that would help, learning from what has happened? And if we are going to be exposed to these snap lockdowns from time to time, and I think that is going to be our world for the next year or so, what would you like to see happen—that one thing? What is your priority?

**Mr PERRING:** Well, I think if we got the dialogue sorted out between government and the industry—

**Mr BARTON:** A round table?

**Mr PERRING:** then a lot of the other issues will get flushed out from there. I think one of the major problems has been that the industry has not known who to talk to. You know, the health people are a bit of a black box—

**Mr BARTON:** To everyone.

**Mr PERRING:** and they are surrounded by a lot of advisers and public servants—you have got a lot of them—so it is very hard to sort of penetrate from our perspective, and you do not know whether you are resonating or not.

**Mr DAVIS:** It is like trying to get through a forest.

**Mr PERRING:** Well, exactly—exactly right. I mean, that is why I was sort of underlining the need for the live music round table. But if we could get—

**Mr BARTON:** Get that communication open.

**Mr PERRING:** that sorted, all of the other issues will then be known to government and they can be addressed accordingly.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. On that point—if you do not have anything to add, Matt—we will go to Mr Quilty to ask the next question. Thank you. I think Jon gave quite a comprehensive answer. Mr Quilty, then Mr Davis and then Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr QUILTY:** So how is industry recovery different between different states, and how are the states doing things differently that Victoria could be or should be doing?

**Mr PERRING:** Is that directed at myself?

**Mr QUILTY:** Either of you, but probably more Matt.

**Mr JONES:** Well, look, I will pick that one up. I mean, I think a lot of this goes back obviously to the initial stages where as a consequence of what happened Melbourne had restrictions in place for a lot longer than other states. You know, I am not an epidemiologist or a health person, so I do not understand, but when, for instance, we had the snap lockdown in Sydney a couple of weeks ago, rather than events being cancelled there was a broad mandate that people just wear masks in the events. Whereas when the snap lockdown occurred in Melbourne those events were restricted to unmanageable levels. So that is a simple scenario. We understand that snap lockdowns are going to have to happen and that we cannot hold large concerts during those periods, but it is the length of those restrictions, how long they go on for and the severity of the restrictions, and what is required and imposed are the other issues.

Look, I think that the final thing I would add is that the path out of this is not very clear from a Melbourne perspective. We had clearer guidance from a Queensland, New South Wales and New Zealand standpoint. There is a clearer path for what is going to happen, and that would be welcomed from the industry as well, just from a planning point of view.

I will finish by saying that we have seen a real change in buyer behaviour, and as we recover people are very, very uncertain about booking and are leaving it until the last minute, because everyone just feels uncomfortable about going ahead without knowing, and the closer they get to the date the more comfortable they feel. And I think that is because there is that lack of uncertainty about what is going to happen; the path to this being resolved is so uncertain. So a clearer path from Victoria around when we can get back to events and what the requirements are would give everyone more information on which to base their decisions and feel more confident about looking at things moving forward.

**Mr PERRING:** Can I just add one other point? I totally endorse everything that was just said, but also we were locked down for substantially longer than any other state. And the impact that that has had on the surviving organisations and particularly on their balance sheets—not just their cash flow and on their profit and loss, but on their balance sheets—is going to really need to be addressed or we will not be able to get back to where we were in pre-pandemic times.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might actually pass to Mr Davis then Mrs McArthur then Mr Tarlamis.

**Mr DAVIS:** Look, I have got one question for Jon and then probably a more general one for both. Essentially we were locked down for longer, but also much more harshly. The ratios and the rules around access to venues and the size of venues—the number of people that could be put in—were much lower here in Victoria than in New South Wales or Queensland or Tasmania. I do not know about New Zealand; I have not done the tables. And I am happy to provide the secretariat with my many tabulations of the different rules, but I think it is true to say that they were much harsher—

**Mr PERRING:** Yes, that is definitely the case.

**Mr DAVIS:** and still are.

**Mr PERRING:** Yes, although at least for us in the smaller venues as of the 29th we will be able to go back to similar capacities. They are not the same, but they are workable.

**Mr DAVIS:** Within those rules, the orders are published by the Chief Health Officer. Everyone can see them. They often come late at night and you are locked down the next day. But leaving that point aside, there are reasonings and briefs and material behind that and explanations as to why certain ratios are struck and certain rules are struck—divergent, I might add, from other states. Have you ever seen any of those? Have they provided explanations as to why Victoria was shut down harder in venues than other states?

**Mr PERRING:** Look, it is a very good point. We have not seen the reasoning behind some of the decisions that Health made, and we believe that some of those reasonings were not really founded on science but on assumptions that people were making about how gigs in fact operated—things around, ‘Do all people dance at shows?’. Well, that is simply not the case that somehow audiences were always going to sing and therefore aspirate into the venue. Well, we put on original live music. Most people do not know the lyrics to the songs that are being put to them. And you compare that with sport, where people are basically bellowing out their lungs singing the Richmond football song, the ‘yellow and black’ line, as an example of high aspiration. There are distinct differences.

**Mr DAVIS:** Do you believe those documents should be in the public domain?

**Mr PERRING:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Davis. I just want to stick to the one-question rule because there are so many committee members present today. We are all very eager to hear from both of you. Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you very much, Chair. It was illuminating with the last speaker, who told us that \$633 million had been injected into the government stakeholder space in this whole events and tourism area, but nothing to business events for Victoria. I do not know how much you got, but given that the government has seen fit to fund its own public service, effectively, but not do anything to ensure that we get out of this stage of random lockdowns—for no good reason, half the time—have you got anything to say on those points?

**Mr PERRING:** Well, we were the beneficiaries of a specific grant for live music venues, and frankly it saved our bacon. But just to put that in perspective, between my two venues we have probably somewhere



around, I do not know, maybe a \$4 million annual turnover. So the \$100 000 in that context to offset costs did not go all the way, and hence my point that I was saying about how beaten up we are at the moment. We are still in a very precarious position and we have been the beneficiary of some of that funding. There have been other things too. There have been lots of little government ones. Unlike, for instance, other portions of the arts sector that are directly funded by government, we do not have access to any of that funding, and maybe there should be a conversation around how that in fact is the case.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you. Does Matt want to comment?

**Mr JONES:** I think all I can add to that is probably really a reiteration of the point I made earlier on, which is that I think that government funding, either through the business events grant or the RISE funding, has been very welcome for the industry. I think what it has not been able to achieve to date is give the supply chain—

So there is a long supply chain, right? You have got the venues and the promoters who are putting on the events and housing the events, but then there is the small supply chain—the caterers, the equipment providers and the waiting staff and blah blah blah, it all goes down through. Now, I do not see it coming down through the supply chain at the moment. I understand that from a venue or promoter's perspective, but I think there is some opportunity to make sure that cash is washing around the supply chain further, because if that supply chain does not exist, it is going to be very, very difficult for events to be held when there is the opportunity to do so again.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Tarlamis, then Ms Lovell.

**Mr TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Jon and Matt, for your comprehensive presentation today and for coming along and talking to us. We have heard both today and from the submissions and previous witnesses in the sector—the events and festivals and live music sector—around the way in which it is understood, the complexity of it and how it is sometimes categorised or put in together as one cohort, if you like, where it has been described as a broad church and there is that lack of understanding, and that when advice has been provided it has not been fit for purpose. I understand in Jon's case the live music round table could be a mechanism to actually be able to address some of those issues and provide that feedback through that. But in terms of the events sector, a specific one-stop shop, if you like, or an ability to be able to access information or contacts around events and where to go for advice and even get that sort of specific information about events—what has happened, if you need assistance and all that: would that be something that would be helpful for the industry but also to be able to liaise with around understanding the factors and issues that relate to the industry?

**Mr PERRING:** Look, much of that knowledge does not reside in government, it resides with the various sectors of the industry, and that is why I think, you know, you need a forum where it has both got government on it and you have got industry on it, so that that knowledge can essentially be transferred and policy can be developed. Also, more importantly, when government do have thought bubbles, which they do from time to time, they can be vigorously tested, as opposed to them just being put out there and implemented and then suddenly we have to deal with regulations that are essentially ill conceived. I have given you that example around, for instance, the initial health advice—like putting 5 metres in front of the stage, having that distance between audience and band. Almost all the stages in Melbourne could not accommodate those offsets, certainly none of the small venues could, and it meant that we could not put anything greater than a two- or three-piece on most of those stages, let alone like a latin working band, which is maybe a 12-piece.

**The CHAIR:** So the live music background, say, would be the mechanism for that in terms of live music—but in terms of the event sector?

**Mr JONES:** I would just add from my personal perspective, there is no way out of this without industry and government collaborating, and again I draw on that point I made earlier around a pathway out of this. I mean, if we could get a body together between industry and government that could come up with a safe and clear path to normality, these are the factors that will drive these decisions. That would be enormously helpful for confidence, because, believe it or not, we are making our own decisions around that if we can see it. In some ways you feel more in control if you know what the variables are. That would be enormously helpful from my perspective.

The other thing I think, and Simon Thewlis touched on this as well, is we really appreciate the opportunity as an industry to actually be sitting at this table. It is not an industry, to be honest, that has really been taken that seriously in the past. I hope that out of the various inputs you have had from the different industry players, and

will do so over coming weeks, you come away from this understanding this is a real industry. I absolutely think it does require a body that focuses on it, developing it. Obviously from a recovery point of view, that is important. But actually beyond the recovery, let us make more of this huge opportunity that we have got in Victoria as such a fantastic event capital, and also, as I have touched on today, the knowledge that is behind it and it is exporting internationally. It is certainly by all means not just us. There are people doing incredible things exporting this knowledge not just internationally but nationally. If nothing else comes of this but we take this industry more seriously and develop a road map for our future, then what a great outcome.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might pass on to Ms Lovell and then Mr Gepp.

**Ms LOVELL:** Okay. So you mentioned the Live Music Roundtable, which we have just been discussing—that it was not convened, there was no formal dialogue. Can you explain why that was not convened? Also, how important is it that it is convened now? Is it imperative that it is convened today, this week, next week or whatever to guide the industry going forward? Also, there was a new minister appointed on 29 September, for creative industries, has he ever met with you, as the live music industry?

**Mr PERRING:** Well, to take the first part of the question, you would have to ask Creative Victoria why it has not called the meetings. I can only surmise that everyone was running around trying to deal with the pandemic at the time, which we totally understand, but that is no excuse for it not really being active. And on the importance of it, that forum exists. It has members and it should have been utilised, and hopefully I have sort of covered all the reasons why. In terms of the new minister, no, I have not met with him. During the lockdown we did lots and lots of Zooms with, I do not know, many public servants and many advisers—really, anyone who would talk to us, we would talk to.

**Mr DAVIS:** You could talk him through how to use the Zoom.

**Mr PERRING:** Yes, that is right. And we did penetrate, like government has responded. That needs to be acknowledged. But what road we actually made it through, I really do not know. It is like suddenly something happened and you read it in the press release, and you can see that it has been acknowledged but you do not know which was the door that was opened that you actually managed to go through. Now, I have been engaging with government, really, for a very long time—really since going back to probably 2004—on many, many, many issues, and it has always been a bit of an issue. Sometimes you get a door in through liquor; sometimes you get it through jobs and precincts—probably more recently. You know, you never quite know sort of how it is going to work. You know, you put the issue up there and then occasionally you get it over the line. You have just got to find the right person but, you know, it is—

**Ms LOVELL:** So I guess what we take out of that is that the government members should take back to the minister that he convenes a meeting with you as a matter of urgency.

**Mr PERRING:** Yes, sure, I am always available.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might pass over to Mr Gepp to ask the final question for our witnesses. Thank you, Mr Gepp.

**Mr GEPP:** I will not try to interpret the answer before I ask the question. Just in relation to vaccinations, we are hearing more and more from the health experts, both domestically and internationally, that the way through COVID is going to be widespread vaccination; that is the program that needs to be implemented and adopted. I am wondering if that is the case and about the impact, of course, of that on your industry. What do you think about the current vaccination program that we have here, and do you have any thoughts about what we need to do to that program that will assist your industry?

**Mr PERRING:** Look, it is not an area of expertise that, really, I would sort of want to put an opinion on. All I can say is, really, 'Bring it on'. The more we get people vaccinated, clearly the more people can move around and clearly the needs for Fortress Australia are diminished.

But you know, just to give a little example, with festivals and events, many tours are a sort of based around that. So if festivals are not getting up and the tours are not happening, that means that, you know, venues like ours, such as the Tote Hotel and Bar Open, are not getting sideshows. So the bands that we are putting on at the

moment are really all local. So, you know, the faster these health responses are rolled out—it is going to have a flow-on effect to the health of the industry, sort of, in the longer term.

**Mr GEPP:** Thank you. Matt, did you have a view?

**Mr JONES:** Look, from a vaccination point of view of course the sooner we can get as many people vaccinated, obviously the better. You know I was listening to one of the large venues out in Las Vegas this morning. They are now booking large shows. I think Garth Brooks is 65 000 in July or something like that. So it is obviously the path forward. For us as a country and of course as an industry it is absolutely critical, the vaccination program.

I think, just listening there to Jon's final point, one thing I would add is—you know, from a potentially vested interest of our industry—a number of those international acts are starting to come through. I think we have got, you know, Guns N' Roses scheduled in four or five months time. Over in New Zealand we are seeing them coming through already. You know, an opportunity exists. A lot of those international shows will tend to bring their own production with them. With that production come more people from international, exposing us to, you know, risk of outbreaks and things like that. The production capability exists in Australia. We are described as absolutely world class. Let us get the acts in and let us leave the production, and the people that come with their production, back in their country and service it from Australia. So, you know, when we are granting those permissions, as we will do, I would love to think we could think about that as an opportunity to help our industry recover.

**Mr GEPP:** Just on that point, Matt—very quickly, Chair—my understanding is that we are seeing that a lot of international artists, be it music, acting or whatever it might be, are actually seeing Australia, because of the work that we have done around the pandemic, as a preferred destination. Now I understand they have got to come in and quarantine, but seeing the flexibility that we have—

**Mr PERRING:** We are safe here.

**Mr GEPP:** contrasted with the rest of the world, people are starting to come here and are organising that travel.

**Mr JONES:** Yes, absolutely. Let us maximise the value of them coming in for our country.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. On that point, Matt and Jon, I just want on behalf of the committee to thank you both for sharing your experiences and insights on the way forward for the events sectors. Like I said, on behalf of the committee I just wish to thank you all for your contributions and presentations today. On that note, our next witness is ready, so the committee will take a short break before the next witness.

**Mr PERRING:** Thanks for the opportunity.

**Mr JONES:** Thank you for the opportunity

**The CHAIR:** Our pleasure.

**Witnesses withdrew.**