

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Anglesea—Wednesday, 12 May 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Mark Gepp

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr David Davis

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Andy Meddick

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESS

Mr Damien Cerantonio, Managing Director, Great Ocean Road Resort.

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 acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

I wish to introduce my fellow committee members that are present here today. I will start from left to right: Ms Wendy Lovell, Mr Andy Meddick, Mrs Bev MacArthur, Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Mark Gepp and Mr Rod Barton.

I would now like to call our first witness, Mr Damien Cerantonio, the founder of Great Ocean Road Resort. Before I do that I will read a short witness 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's 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 be made public 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 allow plenty of time for discussion. Could you please give your name for the benefit of the Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you. Thank you.

Mr CERANTONIO: Damien Cerantonio. I am here in my capacity as owner of Great Ocean Road Resort in Anglesea, where we are now. Thank you for choosing us. Great Ocean Road Resort consists of 30 accommodation rooms, a day spa and wellness centre known as Lux Spa and Wellness, a fine dining restaurant known as The Coast, a conference and event space including a private dining room, an outdoor trampoline park known as Jumpz Anglesea, an indoor heated pool, a gym and a tennis court.

Although I am here in my capacity as owner of Great Ocean Road Resort I am involved in a number of other tourism-related businesses. I am the co-owner of the following tourism-related businesses: Anglesea Riverside Motel, which is a 17-room motel in Anglesea; and Great Ocean Road private luxury tours, which specialises in providing private tours along the Great Ocean Road and surrounding regions. One hundred per cent of our clientele were international travellers; since March 2020 we have done two tours. I am also the co-owner of Smart Travels Art of Business and Leisure, which is an inbound tour operator business specialising in bringing Indian travellers to Australia, a mixture of FIT travellers and group travellers, so obviously since March we have not been able to do any business and have just been processing refunds.

In addition to the businesses I own I sit on a number of tourism committees and boards. I am the deputy chair on the board of Business Events Victoria, I am the president of Business and Tourism Anglesea and I am a committee member of the Victorian branch of the Australian Tourism Export Council.

A common perception amongst the media at the moment is that the cities are struggling and the regions are booming. Although the cities are struggling, the regions are not booming. Yes, some regions have had a good summer/autumn since restrictions eased at the end of 2020, including the Surf Coast region, where my accommodation businesses are located. However, the period from December to April is our normal peak period, so all this has meant is that for some businesses we took in what we normally would, which has helped cover the losses that we sustained in 2020. There have also been many regions which are 2 to 3 hours from Melbourne who have not had the benefit from having a bumper peak summer period.

In many ways the crisis has just hit regional tourism businesses, and when I say ‘just hit’ I mean post-Easter, the school holidays just gone. The regions who were already struggling are going to struggle even more over the next 12 to 18 months, and the regions who have had a better period since Christmas are about to have their toughest off-peak season, when we will see businesses collapse.

To run a successful accommodation business in regional Victoria you cannot simply rely on our peak seasons or weekends to survive. Prior to COVID-19 the Great Ocean Road Resort’s guests consisted of 70 per cent domestic, with 30 per cent being international travellers. However, if you break this down further, in our off-peak period, May to October, our breakdown was split 50 per cent domestic and 50 per cent international. And if you break it down even further, our midweek bookings in our off-peak period had a breakdown of 70 per cent international and 30 per cent domestic. These statistics highlight the importance of international travellers to regional tourism businesses, especially in our off-peak season.

The conference and event space is going to play a critical role in ensuring tourism businesses are financially stable all year round. Conferences are often held outside of our peak school holiday periods, are often midweek and have a high dollar spend compared to leisure travellers due to a higher food and beverage spend. The conference and event space is going to be critical in helping offset the loss of international travellers during the off-peak season.

Just to highlight what I said before about how the crisis is just hitting us, I know it is only a short period, but the period from 23 April 2019 to 11 May 2019, which is roughly the three weeks post the Easter school holidays, we had an occupancy rate of 85.9 per cent. For the same period this year we had an occupancy rate of 58.62 per cent, which is a decrease in occupancy of around 46 per cent.

So those are probably the main things I want to start with, just emphasising that, you know, as a business owner the next 12 to 24 months is probably more daunting than the 12 months that we have just had. Yes, we have been fortunate to have JobKeeper and government subsidies to help for the past 12, 18 months. And I am happy to say, you know, I do not think it is part of the solution moving forward that we do need JobKeeper, because as a business owner I understand that it is not sustainable forever. Although we appreciate the support that JobKeeper did provide us, when we talk about initiatives that are going to help businesses like mine moving forward I would rather those initiatives be ones that are going to have a longer term benefit on our region. Are you happy for me to mention a couple of these now?

The CHAIR: Yes, of course. Please, go ahead.

Mr CERANTONIO: And it obviously goes without saying that at every possibility we need to avoid snap lockdowns, but what I would like to see is, you know, incentives for tourism and accommodation businesses to make improvements. A lot of accommodation businesses are quieter now, so if there could be an incentive for businesses to make improvements to our accommodation rooms, to our facilities, while it is quieter, when international does come back and when confidence for the interstate people comes back our products will be actually better than what they were prior to the lockdown. Because without incentives for business to make improvements, you know, even those annual repairs that businesses will normally do—when businesses do not have the money to pay wages—are going to be getting missed. So when things do open up our products are going to be inferior, and it is really going to hurt us and hurt our ability to attract international and domestic people back to our regions. So, you know, I think some incentives around businesses to make improvements would be beneficial.

Infrastructure spending is going to be critical. And we were fortunate—as proof of I guess how infrastructure spending can help support accommodation businesses—when we first came to the lockdown and became aware of COVID in, say, the end of January 2020. We have a strong Chinese business, and so our Chinese New Year period was obviously wiped away straightaway. So when that happened we started contacting some construction companies that had projects in the area earmarked for the remainder of 2020, and we were lucky enough to win a number of contracts with the Moggs Creek bridge, which was getting built last year. Fortunately that kept us at about 50 per cent occupancy during the lockdown period. Without that we would have been zero. So to help us with our occupancy, especially at this time of year, in that off-peak period, some infrastructure projects, whether that is roads or bridges—that is all going to help. But I take that further with big projects: we do not just want it being infrastructure. We need new tourism attractions in our regions that are going to help bring people here for the next 100 years, and these attractions need to be not 100 per cent relying

on international travellers or 100 per cent relying on domestic travellers. If we look at Anglesea, my backyard, we have got a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity with the former coalmine site in Alcoa, which got closed down I think in 2016 and it has been under repair for five years. Over that five-year period we have been fortunate even in that period to have a lot of the contractors stay with us who have been restoring that land, but to have a project such as the Eden Project come to Anglesea would be a major boost for our economy. And that is not just the tourism businesses—that is your newsagencies, your supermarkets. Also during the construction phase—it will probably take five years to build, so a lot of the trades are going to benefit from it, a lot of the local community groups are going to benefit from it and obviously employment in our town is going to benefit from it. So a project like that—

Mrs McARTHUR: Damien, can I interrupt? Perhaps for everybody's benefit maybe explain what the Eden Project is and what it entails.

Mr CERANTONIO: The Eden Project—they are a not-for-profit organisation and they have got a number of projects around the world. What they do is go to sites such as former coalmine sites and, I guess, transform them into tourism attractions but obviously with the environment at their heart of mind. So they are environmentally friendly. I think their project was in Cornwall in the UK, and that would bring in a lot of domestic travellers, Victorians, interstate and obviously international. From an international point of view this region is very famous for the Twelve Apostles, but our biggest problem is that a lot of people historically have not stayed overnight. They get a bus from Melbourne and they do a day trip to the Twelve Apostles. No money is spent in the region. To be honest, all they really contribute is providing a shit experience for the other travellers that stay overnight or two or three nights, because it is crowded and we do not have the infrastructure to support these big busloads. So we need to provide tourist attractions right along the Great Ocean Road from the start, where we are, to help slow people down—to help encourage multiple nights in our region. That is why providing a huge tourist attraction which is environmentally friendly is really important to Anglesea. We are surrounded by national parks. Our local community love our environment, and that is what makes Anglesea a special place. We are kind of the first coastal town—authentic coastal town—in our region, and we want it to remain that way, but that does not mean that you cannot have some economic development to help businesses in the region and to make us a more attractive region to visit.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Damien. Do you have any more points you would like to add?

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes, I do: incentives for conferences to be held, and as I mentioned I am on the board for Business Events Victoria, and I believe one of the biggest issues at the moment for the conference and events industry is confidence for people to book an event, because people do not want to lose a deposit in the event of a snap lockdown. So some sort of government guarantee scheme—the government would guarantee a deposit. If a snap lockdown did occur, the government would wear the cost of the deposit that was lost. But if the business event happened, then the government obviously would not have to pay the deposit. So it is just to give some confidence for businesses to book conferences in regional Victoria.

Mr MEDDICK: Something like the bank guarantee basically.

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes. Also additional funding for our main tourism marketing bodies, such as Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism and Visit Victoria. Obviously it is a highly competitive space, and over the next 12 months we are competing with Queensland and New South Wales, who are spending a lot of money trying to attract us Victorians up north, so we need to be doing our very best to not only attract people from the north down to us but to try and encourage Victorians to still travel within our state.

Probably the last thing is around employment. One of the hardest things this peak period is we have not really been able to capitalise 100 per cent on it because we just have not been able to attract enough staff to our town and in my case to my business. So that meant at times we had to turn away a lot of day spa bookings because we were not able to attract enough beauty therapists. We were not able to have full capacity in our restaurant because we did not have enough chefs. We did not want to compromise what we were doing, so to do that we had to reduce our capacity. Some incentives to employ people: affordable housing in our town or in our region as well—because a lot of people from Melbourne moving to Anglesea and people who had holiday houses previously now deciding to live there means there is less housing available. Hospitality workers, as you know, are some of the lowest paid workers in our society. To expect—whether they are young, 18 or 19, or whether

they are experienced—hospitality workers on that wage to be able to live in Anglesea or Lorne is a real issue, so we need to, long term, resolve some issues around affordable housing along our coastal regions.

The CHAIR: On that point, Damien, thank you very much for your opening statement. It was very informative. I like the fact that you had a bit of a longer term outlook and vision as well for the region. I appreciate that because you are right: the pandemic will come and go but some of these broader issues will remain. What I might do is hand over to my colleagues to kick off the first questions. I will give it to Mrs Bev McArthur and then to Mr Andy Meddick—they are some of the local MPs in the upper house—and then we will go around to the rest of the committee as required. So Bev, then Andy, two questions please, because there are so many people.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Damien, very much for your oversight of what your industry needs. There are roadblocks in this whole area, and the Eden Project you mentioned has a roadblock as it needs water. There is another project, CORA, which has been on the books for eight years and has got approval. But if industry wants to develop tourism ventures, what would you say to everybody here about streamlining the process? Do we need a concierge system to get through all the hoops of the various bureaucracies we deal with, especially along the Great Ocean Road, even though we have introduced one body over the top of 30 others? Is that the problem for getting things off the ground? It is just too hard to do business to get some of these big projects—I think CORA is \$360 million of private money basically.

Mr CERANTONIO: I have not been part of creating a project of that size, but in saying that, red tape—small businesses are facing it every day. Whether that is through obviously town planning, I think everyone has had an issue previously with town planning and how long things do take—if there could be any streamlining in terms of town planning for tourism ventures moving forward, that would be great. And in terms of the Eden Project, I understand there are barriers at the moment, but if we could be using this time now to fast track, to try to knock down those barriers, that is what we are asking for.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Damien.

Mrs McARTHUR: Just one other thing: you mentioned affordable housing. Would there be space available if all the various authorities got together to even build tiny houses, for instance, that could be used for staff in various ventures but also could be rented out when they are not needed? Is that the sort of thing we could quickly get up and running?

Mr CERANTONIO: There is space. And I guess you cannot create affordable housing using some land that is part of the environment. We need to resolve the problem. We just need to do it in the most environmentally friendly way possible.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: First to Mr Meddick, then Mr Gepp.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Damien. Look, I just want to say from the outset that I am rather impressed that you have come to us not with a whole host of problems but what you have actually presented is a whole host of solutions. As a 32-year resident of the Surf Coast I am acutely aware of the reliance that we have on tourism, the flow-on effect that big projects like the Eden Project can have on the community and what they mean year round. I just want to reflect though. I want to ask you a question that might seem a little bit left of field, if you like, because I took into account what you were saying about JobKeeper. Now that that is obviously gone, we are all aware of the economic realities that that is an artificial prop up and it cannot stay forever, but we had a budget handed down last night, and you may or may not have had time to dissect it. Did you see anything that gives you hope that there is—because to my mind there is a dual responsibility between state government and federal government for the tourism sector because, as you rightly point out, it relies 70 per cent on international tourism—any solution that you can think of, anything in the budget that points to that collaboration happening in a meaningful way for not just your businesses but for everybody around you? Because I bear in mind all the boards that you sit on as well. You know, you have an appreciation for other businesses that are not just your own.

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes, exactly. I think the government's announcement probably a month ago in relation to the cheap airfares, which is probably their cornerstone part of the budget for the tourism support

package, obviously for our region is not great. Even though Avalon is one of the airports, we just know that interstate travellers historically do not come to our region, especially in the winter, and what we do know is Melburnians love going up north in our winter. So it is compounding the issue for us as a region that we are going into our winter period, we do not have any international travellers, and the conference and events space is slowly, slowly coming back, but not really, which would otherwise help us during this period. And now we have the added problem of the Victorian market getting all these incentives to go out of Victoria, so for us, selfishly, there is not much in that airline package that really benefits.

Mr MEDDICK: So if this committee could wave a magic wand and instead of us you would have Tim Pallas, the Treasurer of Victoria, and Josh Frydenberg, the federal Treasurer, sat right here, what would you ask them? What would you be able to tell them to say, 'This is what we need'?

Mr CERANTONIO: The room that we are in now we renovated last year, we redid our restaurant, we redid our day spa. That cost money, and I was fortunate that I had had a good few years financially—the business—and we had that money that we could draw on. Obviously not every business is like that but I am big on, 'Yes, it has been a shit 12 months but what can we do'—when it does come back—'to be in a better position?'. So that is why I said in my opening statement some incentives for business to make improvements is something—and especially for our region, the accommodation in our region is subpar. It is 3 to 4 star. It is the reason we—

Mr MEDDICK: So like a mini infrastructure fund sort of thing?

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: So when we talk in terms of big infrastructure like the Big Build that has been announced by the state government, roads, bridges, all those sorts of things?

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: So a mini infrastructure fund that might sit under that that provides incentives for businesses to do capital improvement would be a good thing?

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes.

The CHAIR: Excellent, Damien.

Mr MEDDICK: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks for that. I might pass on to Mr Gepp to ask a couple of questions.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Damien. Good on you for spending some time with us today.

Mr CERANTONIO: Thank you.

Mr GEPP: Look, I am absolutely at one with you on the half-price airfares. It astounds me that the only airport in this state that got a look-in was Avalon. There are planes flying everywhere above Victoria, and it is a bit of a slap in the face. I mean, particularly when you think about not only Tullamarine but we have got fantastic airports in Mildura, Bendigo and other tourist destinations.

I am interested in the issue that you raised around the service sector workers and the workforce that you are not able to attract back—and that is costing you business. I think you have identified affordable housing as one aspect of the problem there. I wonder if you can share what your experience has been with those workers and whether or not there are other things that contribute to an inability to attract those people. I am particularly thinking about the insecure nature of that work and that it is not permanent work—it is casual; it is seasonal—and whether or not there are some things there that we also need to look at structurally to address that as well as housing.

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes. So what we know is that to attract good people, hospitality workers, you need to be able to guarantee them a job all year round. You know, that is—

The CHAIR: For job security.

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes, that is the most important, and that is why for my business I have spent a lot of time in making sure that we do not just rely on the summer holidays and the weekends. You cannot survive like that, because Sunday to Thursday you cannot just close your restaurant or close your day spa and open it up on the weekend. One, because it is not financially viable, but you need to offer staff full-time work. So it probably comes down to how we ensure that in our regions there is enough demand from people coming into our regions and spending money so that businesses can stay open seven days a week and that it is financially viable to do so, because without offering full-time employment all year round, it is very hard to find the best staff.

Mr GEPP: As you pointed out, many of these workers are at the lower paid end of the wage spectrum and then you add in the insecure nature of the work as well as the low pay. Certainly my experience in my electorate of Northern Victoria is that many of these workers are in casual employment and are lower paid, and they have not had a pay rise for four or five years. You know, it has been static wage growth.

Mr CERANTONIO: And what I would say is that although hospitality workers are some of the lowest paid I do not think you should underestimate hospitality workers who do their job well. It is a profession with expertise. You have all been to a restaurant and you know when you see someone who knows how to do their job right compared to someone that is just taking your food out there. That takes years and years of experience, and they are the people that we are trying to attract, because the customer service levels in our regions—and not just here—need to improve.

Mr GEPP: Sorry, Chair. Just on that point, I think that is absolutely right. The one thing that the pandemic did, I think, was to shine a light on some of those areas of our workforce that have been completely ignored or undervalued—you know, the store people out at the supermarket warehouses or indeed the workers in the supermarkets themselves. The value that they provided to the community during lockdown was extraordinary. And truck drivers.

Mr CERANTONIO: Going on, there could be some incentives for business to put some of their own staff in training programs to help upskill them, so they can improve that level of customer service or add a skill set that would benefit not only the staff member individually but potentially could add value to the business longer term.

The CHAIR: Those are all good ideas. I might go over to Wendy, then Rod and then Lee. We will finish off with Lee.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks, Damien. Your presentation was terrific. As this is a state inquiry—we are state MPs, and we can really only have influence over state decisions—I am going to concentrate on asking you about things that the state government have done or can do to continue to support you. So you mentioned the increase in activity due to the vouchers and stuff over the summer months, which was terrific and started to get people back into tourism in Victoria. But as some of the tourism operators in my area, Northern Victoria, have said, ‘It was a bit like having happy hour on a Saturday night at 7 o’clock’, because that was when they were all busy. The voucher scheme expires on 31 May. You have identified that winter months are your tough months down here; that is when the interstate visitors do not come. So do you think the state government should continue those vouchers through the winter months to continue to encourage Melburnians and other people from around the state to come to the coast here to make use of the facilities during the winter months?

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes. I will be honest, I was quite critical of the voucher scheme when it was announced, because it was over peak period. And I understand that it is not in every region that December to April is a peak period, but there are a number of regions where it is, and all it did was—you know, we were going to be at high occupancy irrespective of the vouchers. And it is hard for us to know how many bookings we had from the vouchers, because we do not see that, but in January we did not need people coming here using a voucher. We would have booked out the room irrespective.

So what we needed the voucher scheme to do was really—ideally it would have been for this period now, when we knew all along that this was going to be the period that businesses were going to struggle; our winter—restrict it to midweek and maybe, you know, a Friday or a Sunday. Obviously everyone wants to come on a Saturday night, but we are trying to get people to stay two or three nights. So if they come on a Saturday, at least stay Saturday and Sunday, or Thursday, Friday and Saturday. So yes, I would like the voucher scheme to keep on going, but it needs to be targeted and not over peak periods, not over school holidays and—

Ms LOVELL: No, that is a very good point.

Mr CERANTONIO: not over the weekends.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, and for multiple night stays so that maybe they can stay one night on a weekend but, yes, continue through your more quiet period during the week, and that would help with your occupancy. Thank you very much.

Also you mentioned about the incentives for conferences, and particularly underwriting the deposits et cetera. So this is something that is a state government decision, if they are going to make a snap lockdown, as we had the five-day snap lockdown over the Valentine's weekend. So do you think that that would be an incentive to conferences to start booking beautiful rooms like this again, if the state government was to underwrite the consequences of any snap lockdown that they had?

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes, definitely. Again, yesterday, we saw one case. And one case, as we know now, could mean a lockdown in the next week. So that is just another reason why. If someone was planning to book a conference in the next week for, say, two months time, they are probably going to put that off now, potentially, because there is still that risk out there of a snap lockdown. Given that a lot of conferences that are here in smaller venues like ours are small businesses—as well as obviously big businesses—people cannot afford to lose deposits, and venues cannot afford not to charge a deposit. If you look at the Valentine's Day weekend, that absolutely killed us. We had both venues full for accommodation, the restaurant booked out and obviously the kitchen full of food. We cannot charge those guests who could not come and stay here, but I still had to pay my staff. I still had to pay—

Mrs McARTHUR: How much did it cost you, Damien?

Mr CERANTONIO: Probably \$80 000 in revenue, and probably 30-odd thousand dollars in costs.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, it is cruel.

Mr CERANTONIO: And that is why JobKeeper is not the be-all and end-all. That is not what is going to kill us. And we are very grateful to the federal government for giving us JobKeeper, because it did make that last 12 months earlier a lot easier to get through and made sure we could support our staff, but these snap lockdowns can kill businesses.

Ms LOVELL: Snap lockdowns made at 1 o'clock on a Friday, when you have ordered food in for a weekend and you have had staff in prepping that food and everything—and once it is prepped it has got to be thrown away, it cannot be frozen.

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes, so that is—

Ms LOVELL: Terrible.

Mr CERANTONIO: You know, that is obviously the most important thing, and obviously we understand and respect that the health of our community is a lot more than what money is, but all we can ask as a business is that the state government is doing everything it possibly can to fix up the quarantine system.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, but as one of my Echuca operators said, 'If the government bureaucrats and ministers who make the decisions actually owned businesses and employed people, they might be more likely to look at isolated lockdowns rather than just a snap statewide lockdown'.

The CHAIR: I might just pass to Mr Barton, because I am just acutely aware of the time. So Mr Barton, and then we will finish up with Mr Tarlamis, who has got a question as well.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Damien. Victoria for many years was sort of the conference centre destination in Australia, and a lot of people did not realise that. Prior to COVID—take that out of the equation—you said previously that people do not come down here in the winter months, which is your off-season. But what we are seeing up in Bright—they had a record summer. Why do you think people are not coming down here? What is holding people back? Because we know millions of people are not travelling overseas.

Mr CERANTONIO: If we are talking about pre COVID, if we look at this winter period that we are coming to, this is really our first winter. Obviously last winter no-one could travel. Pre COVID this is when a lot of Melburnians would go overseas. They would see our region as a place that they would go in the summer, so they would not necessarily associate, 'Let's come down to the Great Ocean Road' with the winter. It is more known for its beautiful beaches, and that is where you come in the summer. Obviously us as a region and as businesses we are working really hard to I guess dismiss that concept. We believe that Anglesea and the Great Ocean Road is a fantastic place to experience—

Mr BARTON: National parks—it has got amazing stuff.

Mr CERANTONIO: in the winter. But our focus as a region has probably been targeting the international down here in the winter because that is where the majority of people have come in that period of time. But we are concentrating on improving our food and wine scene and our spa and wellness, and you know showing the beautiful walks that we have. Bright is a great example that you use, and one of the reasons Bright is so popular is because of its fantastic mountain bike trails. When we talk about infrastructure and what could be spent in, say, Anglesea, for example, if you are look in 10 years time and you have got the Eden Project connected with world-class mountain bike trails connecting the town of Anglesea to the Eden Project, obviously surrounded by national parks, that is what brings people in the winter. We need to have a reason to bring people down here in the winter, and that is where we need projects to be built to make us a more popular destination all year round.

Mr BARTON: We are lacking the infrastructure to have that same benefit—what Bright is achieving in their off-season—

Mr CERANTONIO: Yes.

Mr BARTON: than what we having down here. Ms Lovell spoke about the incentives, so I will not go to that. Just the insecure workers—you raised a really valid point about good-quality staff and how you keep them. Apart from the serious issue about what we can do in terms of finding accommodation for them, how do we reward them to get people to move here, because I think this would be a great place to live.

Mr CERANTONIO: The federal government's JobMaker scheme—I understand why the government has had the age requirements to be eligible for JobMaker. But a lot of our hospitality workers who require full-time employment, who require all-year round employment—not just on the holidays while maybe a young person is studying—are that more mature age. If we look at the people who come and live down the Surf Coast, a lot of my staff are mature age, so let us say 35 plus. Normally they have lived in Melbourne previously, had a full-time job and moved down here for a coastal change. They are happy to work three or four days a week and enjoy the lifestyle down here, so they might do three or four longer days but want more flexibility with their life. So incentives for businesses to employ that more mature age staff member I think are necessary. That would help us be able to afford to pay more experienced workers as well. That is another thing—sometimes you get a more experienced worker who you know potentially could be better for the role compared to a younger person, but you just financially cannot afford to put on the experienced one. So if there was an incentive to be able to pay the price I guess for really good, experienced workers, that would help I guess that whole customer service improve in regional Victoria as well as filling critical roles such as, in my case, beauty therapists and chefs.

Mr BARTON: It is a challenge. Thanks, Damien.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Damien. I will open it to Mr Tarlamis if he has a question.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you, Damien, for your comprehensive and thorough presentation. I just wanted to follow up on some of the questioning that Mr Barton was going down with regard to some of the examples we heard from north-east Victoria, up in Bright. A lot of the travellers and the trends that they are seeing with the increased travel out there are new people going to the region. I was wondering whether you have seen any of that out this way—the travellers coming out here being new travellers as opposed to return travellers—obviously notwithstanding the discussion earlier around the need for more infrastructure in terms of getting people to come here outside of that seasonal time. Will you be considering other ways you can market to those newer people now that they have actually seen the opportunities of what is out here—they have had a taste for the region and seen the sorts of things that are on their doorstep—and how you can attract them to come back again now that they have seen how beautiful it is out here and what is on offer?

Mr CERANTONIO: I think when we are comparing, say, the Great Ocean Road to, say, Bright or really any other region, a lot of Victorians have not been to Bright. Everyone has been to the Great Ocean Road if we are being honest. The Great Ocean Road is the most visited region. Most people that have come to my businesses over the last six months have probably been here before, whether it is to my businesses or to the Great Ocean Road region. So I would not say they are new people, but that is because this has been such a popular destination for so many years, whereas Bright is probably just getting more and more popular. That is why I am not surprised to hear that Bright are seeing a lot more new people, because I believe that as a tourism region they are just reaching their potential. So for us, and as I said at the outset, it is about attracting people that have been here before, given that the Great Ocean Road region has been a highly visited region by Victorians in the years gone by. It is just about us, as a region, marketing different experiences that they can do, especially in the winter period, to help attract them here in the time of need.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Lee, for that question. And thank you, Damien. On that point, I know we have gone slightly over time, but it was a very informative presentation. Thank you for hosting us and thank you for your informative presentation and discussion with the committee. On that note, we will have a short break and then call our next witness.

Mr CERANTONIO: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.