

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

WITNESSES

Mr Brendan Sanders, Business Manager, and

Mr Brett Ince, Executive Director, Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine.

The CHAIR: The Economy and Infrastructure Committee's 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 would like to introduce my fellow committee members that are present with us right now: Mr Rod Barton, Mr Mark Gepp and Mr Lee Tarlamis.

To the witnesses, 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. The transcript will also 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 allow plenty of time for discussion. Could you please begin by stating your names for the benefit of the Hansard team and then start your presentation. Over to you.

Mr INCE: Thank you. Brett Ince, Executive Director of Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine.

Mr SANDERS: Brendan Sanders, Business Manager, Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine.

Mr INCE: Firstly, I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Wadawurrung people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Thank you for the opportunity to present today and to be part of this inquiry. I am sure that you have seen our quite comprehensive statement in relation to the inquiry. What we were going to do is just provide you with some opening statements, some information certainly from our perspective and start off with our organisation, the challenges related to some specific impact areas and then also speak about the opportunities for the inquiry to consider.

So Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine—we are the regional tourism organisation, as outlined by the state government of Victoria as part of the regional tourism board structure, spanning from Werribee through the Geelong and Bellarine region, including the Moorabool Valley, up through to Meredith and the Golden Plains region, and we then neighbour the Great Ocean Road region with Torquay. Pre COVID our region was a \$1.1 billion visitor economy, so it had grown significantly in five years, and we attracted some 6.4 million visitors to the region. We also employed over 7500 individuals directly, but also indirectly we employed another 3500 into the visitor economy as well.

Interestingly for Geelong and the Bellarine, we are very much a domestic short-break destination, but also when you look at the way in which our industries are made up and our sectors, we also attract a significant amount of business travel and conferencing, and we also have a significant amount of international students studying in the Geelong and Bellarine region, so it does provide a very varied visitor economy into the region. We are also very strong with events, so we attract many large events, many of them supported by the state government and local government, and that has also been a significant impact in terms of the events not being in our region over that period of time.

Pre COVID our numbers, our 2027 targets, were considered to surpass \$1.7 billion into the economy and we would attract 7.5 million visitors. So certainly you can see our growth targets—what was going to occur—and also the significant opportunities that we have as a region with Avalon Airport being a growth airport within the region but also the Geelong city deal, with the likes of major infrastructure investments such as the Geelong convention and exhibition centre coming soon as well.

In terms of some of the key challenges that certainly we are set to face, there is definitely a push—and I am sure my colleague this morning would have spoken about this—that weekend travel is very strong at this current point in time. Pent-up demand of domestic visitors wanting to get out of Melbourne and also the commencement of interstate travel has meant that certainly long weekends and peak periods are very, very strong, but we are really seeing that suffering from mid-week travel. And certainly for a visitor economy like Geelong and the Bellarine, where we attract a significant amount of business travel, international students and conferences, that has definitely had an impact of increasing seasonality, not just on seasons but that difference between mid-week and weekend visitation. That has certainly meant that there is a significant amount of profitless volume in the region as well. When I speak about profitless volume, that does mean a significant increase of daytrip visitation into the region. That limited spend from what we would usually see as a high-value traveller previous to COVID, and that has definitely stemmed from interstate and international travel, where a high-value traveller will spend more in a region, will stay longer and will stay overnight as a result, so that is definitely a challenge.

We are also seeing, because of the seasonality, issues surrounding visitor accommodation properties in the Geelong region having a higher variability of bookings. Last-minute bookings we are definitely seeing, which then leads to that real change back to a visitor economy that we would have seen 10 to 15 years ago. We have really moved back decades just in relation to some of those issues. That also extends to staffing as well, and when we speak about the impacts that we have had in terms of reduction of staffing because of that reduction of spend, that has also meant that the staffing is very variable. Number one for business is to staff a property or staff a business, but number two is to also attract quality staff when work is very variable and not as reliable as it was in pre-COVID times.

Certainly there is that issue and that increased need for more urgent government delivery of investment into the visitor economy, and we are very lucky as a region to have the Geelong city deal, the Geelong and Great Ocean Road city deal, which is really focused on the visitor economy and those assets. We would certainly encourage city deal projects to progress to really try to stimulate the visitor economy not just as an initial construction phase but really to try and show that support to the private sector—to look at that public sector investment leveraging private sector investment. I will speak a little bit about that in a moment.

The fastest market to recover definitely in our region was the visiting friends and relatives market. For 50 per cent of our visitors that come into the region—so 6.4 million visitors; 50 per cent of that—the primary reason to visit is to visit a friend or relative. That has been a really strong return for Geelong and the Bellarine, because it is a region about reconnecting with family and friends and we have our high resident population. As I said before, that pent-up demand, that flurry of holiday for short-break visitation has been really important in that scenario.

In terms of economic impact, as I said before, there has been a significant loss, a combined loss in the region of \$127 million for the June 2020 quarter and then other sectors in the tourism industry, including retail with a recorded loss of \$87 million, and the arts with a loss of \$67 million. That has meant there has been close to a 26 per cent impact on the \$1.1 billion visitor economy in the Geelong region.

We have provided you with some scenarios of recovery. We do not see a pre-COVID number for recovery until 2024, which is consistent certainly with other estimates within Victoria and with my counterparts in other regions. That will be dependent certainly on investment in products but also dependent on borders reopening and the opportunities around business travel and international students into the future as well.

I spoke about Geelong and the Bellarine being a very strong events destination, and the major events portfolio in Geelong is usually considered to have an economic impact of around \$50 million per annum. That was pre COVID, so obviously the significant approach going into that is that will see about a \$40 million impact of reduction from those direct events not being able to be held. On a positive note, we are starting to see events come back, but we will really only see larger events come back towards the end of 2021 at this current stage.

We also broke down some of the other impacts and the mental health and wellbeing impact on businesses and the industry itself. We had a very resilient industry in Geelong and the Bellarine pre-COVID, and as you can see from the numbers, it was growing from strength to strength. We saw a number of those businesses go through the impact that they went through—very much small businesses, mum and dad businesses—and needing that significant support. We have certainly seen as an industry association that we have provided a significant amount of support both from a conversation point of view, dissecting restrictions and challenges, but also providing avenues for those businesses and those individuals to seek support through counselling, through sessions and so on and so forth. So we will have a very strong focus of mental health and wellbeing in our strategic plan moving forward for the next four years.

Finally, the workforce and business impact—I will not go through the specific figures, because they are in front of you and I did speak about some of those earlier, but certainly it has had a significant impact on jobs, and what that has meant has been it is very hard to actually attract workforce back to the visitor economy. Certainly in our region what that has meant is that businesses that would usually be seven-day-a-week businesses that have received strong demand over that summer period have had to close on days because they just cannot get those staff, because a lot of quality staff have transitioned to other sectors that have very much a stronger sort of phase in terms of stability for their own work life and own jobs.

Certainly on a positive note we are still seeing long-term investment in our region, and we have not seen a slowing of that. From the public investments in Geelong and the Bellarine I will refer certainly to the Geelong Arts Centre as being a significant investment by the state government that we are very thankful for. We are seeing a significant amount of accommodation developments that will be happening around that precinct. We have also seen a similar approach on initial demand for the convention centre precinct as well. So it is really showing from that public investment what the private investment can bring, and as a result there are about 22 accommodation developments that are worth \$526 million that we will see over the next five to six years into Geelong, which is very, very positive. We are also seeing about 14 attraction and experience developments and 13 visitor infrastructure developments, whether that is Avalon Airport expansion or the work that is happening down at the Queenscliff ferry terminal with the terminal redevelopment that is also being supported by the Geelong city deal.

I will hand over to Brendan now just to touch on a couple of points on opportunities, and then we will open up for conversation.

Mr SANDERS: Thanks, Brett. We thought it would be a good idea to round out the conversation with some recommendations to the committee based on noting the challenges that we have had and suffered in our region in particular and across Victoria as well. The challenges that Brett just ran through around economic workforce, mental health and events impacts—that is what our focus is really on in the recommendations around demand-driving initiatives. Basically the first recommendation: I will not go into too much detail—as you can see with the submission that we put forward, there is quite enough detail in there—but events activation and insurance support was the first one that we put down. Geelong, being a major events capital for regional Victoria, has been significantly impacted through that. Moving forward what we are seeing the challenge being is that there is a lack of confidence in running events around the potential of closures and not being able to run events, for example. So we need to negate those challenges. The recommendation here is basically to look forward to providing an underwriting opportunity for those events, so providing them the financial support and confidence that they can propose to run the event. But in the case that they are unable to run an event because of COVID restrictions making them required to postpone that event, for example, there is a strong supply chain impact to running these events as well, so it provides them with that, I guess, confidence to progress with that event.

Innovation and business development support—what we saw over 2020 as well, particularly from our end. We surveyed our 800 members, and we definitely saw 100 of those members, being local tourism businesses within the region, had over the year innovated, adapted and used technology to transform their business and form some sort of other revenue stream while they were unable to accept visitors through their door. What we have seen as businesses have started to open up is that the success from those adaptations has continued, so they have continued using booking services or live streaming services for their venues. Where we see the opportunity here is that while it was a huge challenge for the industry and definitely hurt the businesses on multiple levels, they have adapted and they were forced to adapt, and that should be supported on an ongoing basis so that that opportunity can continue.

The third one that we have got is adoption of the visitor recovery plan 2.0. This is the recovery plan that the Victorian Tourism Industry Council have put forward as a recommendation. We fully support that plan, in particular the initiatives that support regional Victoria, including the \$100 million investment in a relief and survival package for the supply chain that supports our multimillion-dollar events sector; development of a government-backed events deposit scheme to restore booking confidence and get cash flow flowing into the business events sector; and also development and funding of an aviation recovery strategy to attract direct airline services back to Melbourne and Avalon airports. We have seen, particularly with Avalon Airport, that that has been a success for the Geelong region as well, so we are keen to see that continue.

The final one is increased funding for demand-driving initiatives, in particular supporting Visit Victoria as the marketing arm of the state government to promote and attract visitors back out to the whole of Victoria and how that extra funding can support visitors getting back into the regions.

I might leave it there, and I am happy to take questions on that brief summary.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Brett. It is good. I read the submission, and it is very comprehensive. On that point, I might start from my left this time and hand over to Ms Lovell to ask the first question.

Ms LOVELL: I am just going to ask quite simply: if you were the Premier for the day, what are the top two things that you would do to restore confidence and visitation in Geelong?

Mr INCE: There are probably two things that I would consider. One is definitely that consideration of ensuring that with outbreaks—and we are currently seeing an outbreak in Melbourne at the moment potentially, but my thought process around that is that we have got a lot better at managing those outbreaks and ensuring that we do not have to close businesses. So if I was the Premier of Victoria for the day I would try as much as I could to ensure that we suppress those outbreaks and keep businesses open, because every time we have a lockdown—

Ms LOVELL: And look to the New South Wales model of that localised lockdown?

Mr INCE: Yes, exactly right. And every time we have a lockdown it changes consumer confidence significantly. So we seem to build for two or three months—we do very well in terms of pent-up demand, getting Melburnians out to regional Victoria, which is fantastic—and then we go back significantly. And particularly the snap lockdown that occurred in February, the five-day lockdown, being over the Valentine's Day weekend—I am sure you have all heard this before—there was a significant amount of distress to businesses, not just obviously from bookings and so forth, but the amount of stock that they lost over that time. We are very much a destination weddings area, and we had businesses that had four or five weddings in one weekend, so you can imagine the distress that occurred during that time. We know that health is first and foremost, of course, but definitely ensuring that we keep the suppression of an outbreak down and keep things open.

The second point that I would say is to try and revive the events industry, so definitely the recommendation that Brendan just spoke about is: how we de-risk the events industry? So if there is an issue in that regard and there is a major event—you know, the ripple effects that happened with the Byron Bay festival, the blues festival, up in New South Wales certainly rippled through a lot of event organisers in Victoria, including ones in our local region. So it is how we create some sort of scheme so that if they are up to opening that event, we provide them insurance so that they do not fall over and are able to actually run their next event.

Ms LOVELL: So we have been hearing a lot of people saying that perhaps the state government should underwrite the events because they are the ones that make the snap decision at 1 o'clock on the Friday afternoon to close for five days. That they should underwrite it to give people confidence to come back.

Mr INCE: Exactly.

Ms LOVELL: And the other thing that I would just like to ask about is the voucher system. It has obviously been very successful, but it was over what was a peak period of, you know, summer and autumn. Do you think those vouchers should be extended through the winter months? Because they finish on 31 May.

Mr INCE: Yes, certainly my response to that would be—and this is probably consistent with my counterparts around Victoria—that in summer it was great to see confidence; however, the issue that we had in summer was that the region was already full. So, you know, it was hard to then provide that voucher to stimulate demand. From our perspective in our region, if we could see a voucher system certainly extended, it would be very valuable—winter is our off-peak season, but also to have some focus on midweek travel.

Ms LOVELL: Yes, I think we are hearing that loud and clear.

Mr INCE: So the issue is that it is a very broad voucher system, which it needed to be in its commencement, but by now we really need to hone in on when we need to stimulate demand, and that is midweek travel and that is during off-peak periods.

Ms LOVELL: Yes. So the comparison to that is people saying, ‘We have happy hour on Tuesday at 5 o’clock’. But you do not have it on Friday night and Saturday night at 7 o’clock, because that is your busy period.

Mr INCE: Exactly right. And it would provide businesses some confidence to open midweek in some regards.

Mr SANDERS: And I think—extending on the midweek discussion, and it was touched on, but just to reiterate—the core markets that fill up midweek are going to be the slowest to recover. And the lower yielding markets are the ones travelling on the weekends. So the initiatives need to support driving markets to drive midweek visitation up.

Mr INCE: And certainly I know we will need to move on, but from a business events point of view, a conferencing point of view, a localised initiative that we brought in was actually attracting conferences to the region with a \$50 per delegate scheme. And that has been very successful in Geelong and Bellarine, and we will be working with our counterpart, hopefully with some funding supported from RDV, to extend that program. So the whole idea is to provide that, and that then directly goes back to businesses, similar to a voucher system.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you for that perspective. And I know in Geelong you are representing definitely a growing part of our state, and I know the state government has played its part. During my previous career I saw how we moved the Transport Accident Commission and elements of WorkSafe, so we diversified the local economy in Geelong and Bellarine quite extensively, and obviously as a result I think that is part of the reason why it has flourished.

Mr INCE: Definitely.

The CHAIR: But I think you touched on a number of important issues. One of them I do want to touch on is travelling in the regions. We were up in Bright recently, and they were saying from a demand side they have actually got a lot of demand out there, but they were having supply-side issues, such as labour shortages and housing et cetera and digital connectivity. But one sector that I think overall we have all been hearing about consistently is the events sector. Whereas with the tourism sector some areas are doing really well and some not so well, like the Melbourne CBD, the event sector overall has taken a big hit, because obviously the health precautions are paramount and as a result no government can guarantee, I guess, overseas travel or that there will not be restrictions depending on the health needs of the broader public.

What do you say to the events sector? Even if they were to be able to have events going at the same or a similar level to pre-COVID, would there be demand for it anyway? I think a lot of businesses—from what I am hearing anecdotally—like the idea of the cost saving, you know, during these times, of moving online to Zoom or Teams and not incurring those extra costs. And people themselves do not want to attend in person. We are saying, ‘Return to office, restrictions have been lifted’. The public is more than welcome to work from the office 100 per cent if they like, and many of the events restrictions in terms of quotas or percentages or density limits have been lifted, but still we are not seeing the same number of people return. So maybe could it be that the events sector will probably follow the health results? Like, they are linked. So as the vaccine gets rolled out, as people become less fearful of the COVID coronavirus, people will be more willing to attend events as well. Because maybe you understand the supply side, and you raised underwriting, but do you think there might be

an actual shift in that space that is not going to be resolved regardless of the government's role until the health side has been resolved?

Mr INCE: Yes. We probably see it a little bit differently to that. I will speak specifically about business events, and I will refer to Brendan because he also oversees a team that we have focused on business events. The interesting point for Geelong as a destination for business events is that it is often seen as a retreat destination out of Melbourne. So whilst we receive formal national association business events which can be up to 1000 delegates depending on the type of events—whether it is a Lions convention or a national association of a sector—we also do see a lot of team building that happens in our region as well. So that is both team building in the context of bringing teams together but also in strategy planning work and executive retreats. What we are finding is that the inquiries to our venues have actually increased significantly since there has been the opportunity to have businesses go back into offices, because like there is pent-up demand in short-break domestic visitation, there is also pent-up demand for actually reconnecting with your colleagues and doing what we are doing today—being face to face and being able to converse with one another not just in an online meeting but also in regards to strategy and planning and workshopping and so forth. So we feel that Geelong and the Bellarine is very well placed for that.

We are seeing the demand and the inquiries come through, and we have actually lost a number of inquiries that have been 1000 to 1500 that we cannot fill because we do not have a venue to fill it because of the convention centre not being there. So that is probably at odds a little bit with the online phenomenon, but we also see the opportunity in the future, because of the convention centre, to create a centre that is known nationally and internationally to be able to host hybrid events. So at the moment those types of facilities are retrofitting technology. Some work, some do not, some do not work very well, and the opportunity that we have actually got as the next large convention centre being created within Victoria is to look at how we design that for the future.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Brett.

Mr SANDERS: And to build on that as well, a recent Visit Victoria/Victorian Tourism Industry Council state conference was held last month—double the attendance of any previous year held. That was held in person as well, and there was a combination of overseas speakers, so it was a hybrid-run event.

Speaking of business events for Geelong and the Bellarine as well, to reflect on our You Belong in Geelong campaign, that is the voucher system for attracting business event activity to our region where we give \$50 per delegate. Secured business to date—we have had to up the quota for that. We have surpassed the budget allowed for that. We have secured \$600 000 in events activity and got \$400 000 in pending business at the moment. Basically the program runs out at the end of June, so we have got a while yet to go for that one as well. That is off a base of \$50 000 worth of investment to attract business. The only way that money can be accessed is for in-person events that are using venues within the region and experiencing the dining and restaurants as well. That in itself—those figures—represent that, particularly for the business events sector, there is strong demand particularly now for regional in-person activity.

And to reflect on the leisure events as well, a board member of Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine had some anecdotal evidence as well that shows that a local festival in the region actually sold out of paid tickets within a couple of days of going live. That was for a leisure event held in a regional town, so I think while there is a cap on attendance to that event, the fact that the tickets had sold out with very little promotion added to that event shows that there is opportunity, particularly in regional Victoria, for hosting major events moving forward as well. There is interest for in-person activities still. So it is at odds with some of the other feedback that you may be getting, but that is region specific.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that, Brendan. I will pass over to Rod and then Mr Gepp.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, gentlemen. Just with the travel vouchers, is there any data on where those travel vouchers are being spent? Have you got access to any of that information?

Mr INCE: The regional travel voucher system, you are referring to?

Mr BARTON: Yes.

Mr INCE: I know that we have received some initial information on the first round, but it is dependent on each round. Certainly for our region—I think we were at about number five in the state, and that was over that summer period. I would need to reflect on that because it is not in front of me right now. After each round, as I understand it, the department does do that and then they provide that out and usually we are provided with media commentary and the like. My personal feeling is that certainly the regional travel voucher system has been a good start, and it is how we then transition that to drive midweek travel and off-peak travel.

Mr BARTON: A bit more targeted now.

Mr INCE: Exactly right.

Mr BARTON: I just want to compare forward conferencing. Obviously forget last year—if we look at what you have got for the rest of the year compared to 2019, how are we looking there? It sounds like there is some good news out there.

Mr INCE: Yes, there is definitely some good news. What I would say—not having the specific data in front of me today—specifically on our business events pipeline, what I do know anecdotally is that we are receiving inquiries through our Business Events Geelong arm, which is the convention bureau for the Geelong-Bellarine region, like the Melbourne Convention Bureau, and we are receiving long-term inquiries out now to 2022–23. So there is confidence from people looking to book long-term events, but the short term that Brendan is referring right now, the vast majority of those are more smaller size conferences of 50 to 100 people and related to team building and those types of impacts as well. So in terms of previous to now, we have certainly reduced. You can see that in our numbers, but I could not provide that specific data without having it.

Mr BARTON: All right. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Gepp, do you have a question?

Mr GEPP: Thank you. Thanks, guys. Just a couple of points. If I could quickly just make a short comment on the regional voucher system. I have got no problem with us now talking about how we transition into a different phase of that system, but when they were introduced it was at a time where citizens had been in their homes for a considerable period of time and they were looking to get out—

Mr INCE: Yes, pent-up demand.

Mr GEPP: Mum and dad with the kids—so it was about getting them out. Many of the businesses in regional Victoria had not had anything, so it was that short, sharp burst to inject that stimulus straightaway and rip the bandaid off—if I could use that phrase—and get things moving. That does not mean that we do not transition to something else. But there are two things that I want to seek your views on. We have heard from a number of people this morning, and this theme of product diversification has come up again and again and again—you know, ‘How do we as a business pivot to something else?’. The most recent presenter was Raylene who runs Anglesea Backpackers, and she is now thinking about, ‘What do I do to shift the business into some other area where I can get people in the beds, basically, and what is that product offering?’. We heard a similar theme from a number of people this morning—‘What’s available? I have got some ideas. I don’t know where to go. I don’t know where to advance those things’. If I could get your views on that and whether or not there is anything that we can take back on that.

The other point that has really come through—you mentioned it, Brett, and it was certainly mentioned by Liz this morning—is around this issue of employment. The current employment business model that is apparent in the visitor economy—very insecure work, very low paid work, very seasonal work and with not many prospects, it would seem. Now, that has been a model that has been around for quite some time, so I am interested in your organisation, what thoughts you have got on that dilemma and how we shift from that business model, if you like, in employment to something that is more sustainable moving forward. Because it seems to me as if we can do a whole heap of other things, but if you cannot attract a workforce and retain them, you are just on that treadmill and you are not going to get anywhere very quickly.

Mr INCE: Yes. I suppose there are two points: there is certainly that business and product development support, and workforce development. Liz and I have worked on a number of joint projects, so that is why we probably sound similar.

Mr GEPP: Good.

Mr INCE: We speak daily. From a business support and innovation point of view we are an industry that certainly has evolved over time. You look at quite rural, regional areas—a lot of people will sometimes semi retire to those areas and open a business and that is part of their business strategy moving forward for their retirement and so forth. You know, when you compare that to say a regional city, it is a very different scenario, and the fact that we are seeing 22 hotel accommodation developments coming in the next seven years will change the complete dynamics of both business and innovation because there will be quite a strong demand around products but also the workforce development opportunities because the jobs of the future will be there in that regard.

Just before I go off business support and product development, in any other sector when you think about the supply chain and the approach, you think about a research and development phase, a product testing phase, an implementation phase and an evaluation phase, and really a lot of that thinking from other sectors could be applied to the visitor economy, and a lot of the time certainly in that R and D phase you need innovation funding, you need to consider those types of product testing and you need support, you need professional support. So certainly in our conversations region to region but at a Victorian Tourism Industry Council level, there is that real need to try and drive some grant funding or funding schemes around product and innovation in the visitor economy, and not just in terms of transitioning from pre to post COVID, but if you are an accommodation property, such as Raylene that you were speaking with this morning—I used to work with Raylene; I worked for Surf Coast shire—

Mr GEPP: She is a remarkable individual. She is a powerhouse.

Mr INCE: She is a remarkable person—and the opportunity is there for her to also partner with other products that are complementary, to really start to drive and create packages to drive visitor economy demand. So certainly as Tourism Geelong Bellarine, as our organisation, we have been doing a lot of work with the industry to try and upskill and allow them to understand how you create a good product that is marketable, but that is with minimal funding and that consideration. So my personal view is that we definitely need to consider that product and innovation scheme fund and that real strong mentoring support for individual businesses, so not just turning up to one session but allowing them to have an individual mentor that can take them through those phases that could be from other sectors.

Just in terms of that final comment around workforce development, I have actually just come from a regional skills workshop with Deakin University, the Gordon and many different sectors in the Geelong region where we all work closely together. Part of that is that we need to ensure that the visitor economy is a desirable sector to work in, and you are very right that the sector does suffer considerably from low-paid workforce jobs and not necessarily providing a career pathway for certain individuals. So the opportunity, it is chicken and egg—we need the businesses and the products, we need the visitation and we need the workforce to support those businesses and products to provide a high-level, quality experience. In Geelong and the Bellarine, because we do have such a strong investment pipeline, we are working very closely with our education sector to consider what are those courses and what is that training that is needed and how do we create that alongside industry to really drive a pipeline of workforce to support those jobs. I think in the past we have not necessarily done that in a coordinated fashion, and certainly I think at a statewide level that is something that we are trying to aspire to.

The CHAIR: Excellent. On behalf of the committee, Brett and Brendan, I want to thank you for your contribution and your submission from Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine. It has been fantastic—very informative, a good discussion.

Mr INCE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We really appreciate it. A lot of themes are coming through from the regions.

Mr INCE: Yes.

The CHAIR: But I guess you all work collaboratively, so that is expected. After this the committee will just take a short break before our next witness.

Mr INCE: Fantastic. Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.