

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

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

Bright—Wednesday, 28 April 2021

MEMBERS

Mr Enver Erdogan—Chair

Mrs Bev McArthur

Mr Bernie Finn—Deputy Chair

Mr Tim Quilty

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Mr Mark Gepp

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Mr David Limbrick

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Andy Meddick

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Mr David Davis

Mr Gordon Rich-Phillips

WITNESS

Ms Elaine Burridge, Manager, Economic and Community Development, Alpine Shire Council.

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.

I wish to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

I wish to introduce the committee members that are present with us here today: Mr Lee Tarlamis, Mr Tim Quilty, Mr Rod Barton and Ms Wendy Lovell. I would also like to acknowledge Mr Tim McCurdy, the Member for Ovens Valley, is in the public gallery.

I would like to call our witness, but before I do that I will read out a 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 standing orders. Therefore the information you provide is protected. 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, and you will be provided with a transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and put up on our website.

We welcome your opening comments but hope that they are kept to a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes to allow plenty of time for discussion. Would you please begin by stating your name for Hansard, and then start the presentation. Over to you.

Ms BURRIDGE: My name is Elaine Burridge, and I am Manager of Economic and Community Development for Alpine Shire Council. Good morning and thank you for inviting me along to speak this morning. I will just run through some very quick key facts in relation to Alpine shire. So our LGA—local government area—covers approximately 4788 square kilometres; 92 per cent of the shire is public land. The shire is renowned for its natural assets and links to natural assets, notably the Mount Buffalo National Park and the Alpine National Park, which encompass the Mount Hotham and Falls Creek ski resorts. Visitation to both resorts over the winter is significant for Alpine shire, and it is actually estimated that visitors to those resorts contribute approximately \$90 million into our local tourism economy.

Our LGA—local government area—includes the key townships of Bright, Myrtleford and Mount Beauty, as well as other little picturesque villages, including Harrierville and Dinner Plain. Notably, Dinner Plain is also a snow village. It is the only snow village that is run by a local government authority in Victoria. The economy of Dinner Plain is solely reliant on the tourism industry, with winter being its key tourism period. The population across the Alpine shire is approximately 12 814 people.

Tourism and events: key facts on that one. So in 2019 it is estimated that Alpine shire received a total of 852 000 visitors, mainly driven by domestic tourism, overnight and day tripper tourism. The visitation generated an estimated \$379 million in direct expenditure into our local economy. Visitation and visitor spend has been steadily increasing into the shire year on year by 6 per cent since 2010. We had a significant jump between 2017 and 2018—by 29 per cent—so very much increased visitation between those two years.

The accommodation and food service sector is the largest employer in the shire, employing 15 per cent of total people working across the shire. The events sector is also important to Alpine shire. On average council assists to facilitate upwards of 125 community and tourism events each year, and these events are estimated to contribute around about \$42.8 million into the local economy.

Impacts of COVID-19 and bushfires: the first emergency shock for Alpine shire was obviously the bushfires back in January 2020. We experienced multiple evacuations of our townships of Dinner Plain, Harrierville, Bright and Myrtleford. Twenty-nine per cent of the Alpine shire was burned. However, most of that was in the national parks and state forests. While travel confidence into the region was low straight after the bushfires, tourists returned, and they returned en masse, before the first of the COVID lockdowns that came into place in

March. In the first quarter of 2020 it is estimated that with the impact of the combination of bushfires and COVID-19 in March we had a 70 per cent downturn in what would have been our business as usual visitation, which equates to around about \$78 million of that \$379 million gone in the first quarter.

At the end of December 2020 it is estimated that the local economy experienced an 89 per cent loss to expected visitation—\$364 million. So that is \$364 million of our \$379 million in a business-as-usual year. The bushfire and COVID events were estimated to have disrupted around about 2100 jobs across the shire. Once restrictions eased from COVID, once the restrictions eased in the regions so regional visitation was able to happen again, many people flocked. So they did to travel to our region, which was lovely to see. They came for a much-needed break from the four walls of their homes across the state. Once metropolitan Melbourne could travel or take a holiday, visitation to the region increased significantly, and it was actually fantastic to see our township buzzing again after essentially 12 months.

Post the traditional January peak period this year, quarter 1 visitation has remained strong, with accommodation booking agents reporting above 90 per cent occupancy over each weekend and above 60 per cent occupancy midweek, which is a significant change to previous years when weekend occupancy would normally be around about 60 per cent after January and then 40 per cent midweek. Indicative data from accommodation agents is that this trend is actually going to continue to the end of June—the end of the financial year.

The social impact—the impact of bushfires and COVID-19, particularly during lockdowns, will have a lasting impact on the mental health of our residents and business operators. The ongoing uncertainty of the COVID environment is adding to that mental strain that is already there. Many events were cancelled throughout 2020 and in quarter 1 of 2021. Even with COVID restrictions easing, many community events have not and will not proceed. This is largely due to events being run by volunteers and their personal exhaustion with everything that has occurred through 2020 and the challenge of trying to run an event in a COVID environment that we are still living in. Some events may not ever occur again due to that ongoing fatigue. Our communities were lucky not to be hard hit by fire on the ground last year, with only one home being lost in the Alpine shire, while communities in our neighbouring municipalities of Towong and East Gippsland shires have suffered more physical damage. The impact for our communities was really in that economic, social and psychological space.

The community recovery is ongoing. It has not stopped, and it will not stop for quite some time. 2020 was a year of highs and lows, from the loss of the summer visitor season during bushfires to the buoyancy that was in the air when visitors started to come back—and we hosted superstar Katy Perry here in Bright, which was lovely. Then COVID lockdowns came around again, just days later. In fact it was three days after Katy had been here.

Ms LOVELL: Katy was at the venue we are going to be at tomorrow.

Ms BURRIDGE: That is right. So our communities have been through a lot. Our businesses are still trying to regain their feet after the bushfire season. They suddenly found themselves unable to trade, working to adapt constantly and changing their way of life due to an unfamiliar threat, that being COVID-19. As the pandemic went on, the ski resorts opened for a very short time and then the hope of having a very strong winter went out the door when those lockdowns happened. It was really a double whammy for our economy and our community's social welfare.

As previously mentioned, the alpine resorts are a lifeblood for our valley townships during winter. Following on from what was a curtailed snow season came the New South Wales border closures, cutting our residents off from family members, friends, schools and also workplaces.

We have directed an allocation of bushfire recovery funding through the state government towards holding social events to bring our communities back together, and these events have been very well received, well attended and have demonstrated very strong community connection. Additional funding of course would be appreciated to continue the recovery and rebuilding of our stressed communities as a result of all of those shocks that they have had in 2020.

Business impact: tourism businesses across the shire were challenged with looking at ways to diversify their businesses as COVID came around and through those various stages as it happened and with the directions from the chief health officer. While the return of visitors to the region right now has increased visitation and had a really positive impact on the economy, many businesses are absolutely exhausted, and this is due to the ongoing adaptation of what they need to do in the COVID environment and managing the health and safety of

their employees but the health and safety of the guests to their businesses. There is difficulty in retaining staff, difficulty in attracting staff, difficulty in meeting the increased visitation demand and visitor expectations. I do have to note that there are many visitors who are totally complacent with COVID-19, so their expectations are BAU essentially—they expect to be treated that way when they visit businesses. Business owners are also trying to look after themselves on top of running their business. Council was very quick to act in working with our food and beverage businesses to activate outdoor dining. Thank you for the outdoor dining package that was provided by state government. It was very well received.

The main issue around attracting and retaining staff is housing for us at the moment—availability and affordability. The trend of housing stock being purchased and placed onto the holiday-let market has been an issue for our shire for a while. During 2020 it was evident that families were choosing to make a tree change from Melbourne and other regional places within Victoria. This added to what was already a stressed long-term rental shortage issue and the buying up of limited residential stock in the area. Alongside of this, investors were also buying up that limited residential stock. Long-term rental prices have gone through the roof, and purchase prices have also gone through the roof, so we now have a housing issue. There is not enough accommodation available in the Alpine shire for long-term rentals. A high number of short-term holiday rentals across the shire, coupled with increased demand, is causing a shortage in housing availability. Interestingly enough we have just done some research and 19 per cent of our dwellings across the shire are on Airbnb. That figure does not include other housing that is on short-term let markets through booking agents and the like.

Holiday accommodation is definitely essential to our local economy, but we have reached an imbalance where the high numbers of short-term rentals are causing strain on our communities and businesses. The flow-on effect is enormous. It is impacting not only our hospitality and accommodation businesses and their ability to meet visitor demands but also our schools, child care, health services and other key sectors. Our communities are being impacted by this shortage, particularly for key workers in the hospitality, tourism, health and education sectors. There are workers out there who have a job but simply cannot find local accommodation and businesses who are absolutely crying out for staff but cannot recruit staff because they have got nowhere to live. This in turn is impacting the sustainability of our local economy.

Council is calling for state government support and funding to help tackle the problem. Council is proposing to address the issue of the critical housing availability shortage with a plan to ease pressure with a short-term and long-term approach to strike a balance between short-term and long-term rental markets. This is an issue that needs a collaborative approach between council, state government and the community. I do have some more information that has just been pulled together with respect to our plans, and we are seeking state government help. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Elaine, for that comprehensive overview of the issues faced by the Alpine Shire Council. I just wish to place on record our appreciation to the Alpine Shire Council for not only hosting our committee but also the whole Legislative Council this week. It is a real pleasure to come up here. It is my first time in the Alpine shire region, and I will definitely be back. I am making a whole week of it here.

I would just like to begin by asking a brief question. It sounds as though your region is growing and it has got the growing pressures that ironically I can relate to some of the growing suburbs in metropolitan Melbourne it seems, but obviously on a much larger scale. It seems much quicker and faster than the housing pressures there. I want to pivot more to the tourism side initially, but I might come back to some of those some other social issues. We noticed that there were half-price flights offered by the commonwealth recently. Has any of that benefit flowed onto the alpine region?

Ms BURRIDGE: I am not aware that that has had a benefit to the region. That is not to say that it has not, but I am not directly aware of whether that has had a benefit. Essentially, I guess, if there were discounted tickets and people came into Albury Airport—we have not got that visibility, because they would be flying, essentially, into Albury Airport.

The CHAIR: Are you aware of any support received by the Alpine shire from the Victorian government's tourism recovery package?

Ms BURRIDGE: I cannot say that I am, no.

The CHAIR: Okay. That is all I have at the moment. I might pass over to Mr Quilty, then Mr Tarlamis.

Mr QUILTY: What were the impacts of COVID on the actual council finances? Did you give rate holidays or cut rates for businesses?

Ms BURRIDGE: The only relief that we put into place was mainly around our traders, and that was relief in permits.

Mr QUILTY: As the previous speakers said, the COVID crisis is not over. If there is another lockdown or there are border closures, what will be the impact on the shire this year?

Ms BURRIDGE: I guess it depends on the level—whether it is a regional lockdown. If there was a Melbourne lockdown, then I would suggest we would see exactly what we saw last year, and that is—what did I say across the year?—\$364 million worth of loss to the local economy, and that is only on the tourism side of things. So it would depend on what the restrictions were and how long they were for what those losses would look like.

Mr QUILTY: What would the impact of that be on local businesses? Would basically people be going bankrupt?

Ms BURRIDGE: Essentially, I would say yes this time around. Very similar to the resorts, they have been able to keep up business and sustain to date, but I would suspect if we had a second lockdown that many of them we would see close.

Mr QUILTY: What kind of response would the government need to do straightaway if they were to roll out another lockdown?

Ms BURRIDGE: Business support packages—again, similar to the resorts.

Mr QUILTY: Back on the housing issue for a moment, I do get people contacting my office about what is happening with housing in Alpine and Indigo as well. What is council doing to release more land and to loosen up planning restrictions to allow more building to happen?

Ms BURRIDGE: Part of this document here is literally a step-by-step plan of what council is looking to put into place. One of the key items that is being developed at the moment is the land development use strategy, which is going to identify what are the pockets of land that can be opened up. Council is also doing a piece of work at the moment around what are the bits of council land that are owned now and how can that play a role, whatever that may be, in assisting with housing as well. That could be the implementation of some short-term accommodation specifically for workers, as an example. The document goes a little bit further into council's plans.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Quilty. Mr Tarlamis.

Mr TARLAMIS: Thank you for your presentation today. Again also I join with the Chair in thanking you for your hospitality and for hosting the Parliament this week. I am a regular traveller up here. I have friends that live up here, and it is a beautiful area. I enjoy coming up here. There is so much to see, and there is never a shortage of things to do and new things to experience, especially the different seasons and the different things you can enjoy when you are up here. Our previous presenters spoke about the regional travel vouchers and how they would be supportive of that being extended into winter. Would that be something that you would be supportive of also?

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes. Traditionally our peak holiday periods are over what we call the green season, so anywhere from September through to the end of April, and then once the weather turns a little bit not so many visitors come to the area once the leaves have fallen. Dinner Plain, as I mentioned before, is solely reliant on that winter season economy, so certainly those vouchers would be fantastic for Dinner Plain, as they would be for the remainder of the shire, because our visitation does take a dip over that winter period.

Mr TARLAMIS: Also, have the Alpine shire considered or have they already looked at ways in which they could engage with the Victorian government's Regional Events Fund for opportunities there to develop, promote or engage with any existing events or future events that they might be able to apply for?

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes. The short answer is no, we have not. Is the plan to? Yes, it is. I guess planning of events in the COVID environment has been extremely difficult. If I talk on behalf of the events that council

executes but also the event organisers that I deal with on a daily basis who are trying to execute events from 100 people up to 5000 people, the framework was difficult to navigate around in the first instance. There certainly have been changes. It is positive; it is easier to manoeuvre around now. So yes is the short answer in relation to council's appetite to engage with Visit Victoria. Yes.

Mr TARLAMIS: And also, just following up on the Chair's question as well, I think the Alpine shire had received some funding through the Victorian government Council Assistance Fund but also through the local economic recovery program as well—some funding for some projects.

Ms BURRIDGE: For projects—yes, that is right. I am familiar with them. I could not roll them off my tongue right at the moment, but yes, we have benefited from that program.

Mr TARLAMIS: No worries. Thanks.

The CHAIR: I might pass over to Ms Lovell then Mr Barton.

Ms LOVELL: Thanks very much. Thank you, Elaine, for your presentation, and can I thank you for the power of work that you personally have put in to hosting the Legislative Council in the Alpine shire and also the work that the Alpine shire have done in that area. We really do appreciate it, and I have seen firsthand the work that you have put in and also heard from family members how hard you have worked on this, so thank you very much for that. We hope our visit will deliver a much-needed injection of funds into the economy with so many of us being here, and most of us have been here probably for three nights. I know that Mr Barton and I put a bit into Dr Mauve's last night. Mr Meddick was also there and Ms Watt, so we are supporting local businesses as well as accommodation providers, and there is a reception to be held at Feathertop Winery as well, so a big injection of funds. But what more can we do as a Parliament and a government to support the Alpine shire to recover? I am really looking forward to seeing this paper because I know that accommodation is a big problem in the area but also skill shortages. So what more can government do to assist you to recovery from the disastrous year you had last year with both bushfires and COVID-19?

Ms BURRIDGE: If I look at the help that is needed, it is the mental health aspect across community, whether it be business owners who are just challenged day by day with running their businesses and looking after themselves personally. There is also that community mental health side of things as well of not knowing what is around the corner, particularly not right now but as we creep towards what might be the next bushfire season this coming summer. A lot of mental health services are actually not located within the shire; they are outside of the shire. So there are issues with people being able to access those services—not all people but some people—from a transportation perspective. The social connectivity—the events that my department executed to bring our communities together—has been excellent, but there are only finite funds to be able to do that. They have been really well attended, really well accepted—great events, great social connectivity. It would be great to have that ongoing.

Are we going to struggle with getting tourism driver events back into the region or visitation back into the region? I do not think so necessarily. But having said that, the key thing is this housing issue at the moment and working with state government around: what is the answer? How can we all work together to make that better, essentially? And skill shortages, as you mentioned as well—once again, as far as training goes, very little is offered within the shire; most of it is outside of the shire. When you look at young people and their accessibility to those training organisations to get those skills, again transportation becomes an issue. I do not think it is necessarily resolving transportation. I think it might be resolving: how do we bring that training within our shire?

Ms LOVELL: Terrific. Also you mentioned that there was only one house lost in the Alpine shire, but there were significant impacts. Twenty-five per cent of the shire was burnt, but in more remote areas we had evacuations of hospitals here that need upgrading. We are visiting the hospital this afternoon actually. I am visiting there with the shadow minister to talk to them about their needs. But what I am hearing about from the community in all of the bushfire areas is the cost of rebuilding. For those who have lost their homes, very few have been able to rebuild because of the increase in the BAL standards. What they were insured for will not cover them for rebuilding. But it is also the alpine resorts—we heard this morning about their difficulties in getting builders insurance for building new facilities but also in getting insurance for the assets that are already on the mountains. Of course they bring a lot of visitation. Although they are not part of the shire, they are

within the shire boundaries. Has the shire been involved in any of that talk around the insurance problems for the region?

Ms BURRIDGE: I cannot say that we have—certainly not myself, possibly our CEO. I could not comment on that. I am not familiar with the issues.

Ms LOVELL: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you. I am really interested about the housing shortage. Ms Lovell and I are both aware of the trouble in rural and regional Victoria of the shortage of housing. But you have got some special needs here. At one of the restaurants we spoke to yesterday a brother and sister run this place, and he has actually got three young girls from Albury who are living in his house, which is not an ideal situation, him being the boss and all those sorts of things. There has got to be something almost immediately under the COVID recovery financial support, and we do this. Have you explored things like: can we get subsidised housing through some of these B & Bs and stuff like that for these temporary staff, and do we know how many people we need to get in for this shortage? Because it is clear: everywhere we are going people say, 'I just can't get people, and if we get someone, they've got nowhere to stay'. That is a recurring theme around the Alpine area. Have the council and the state government done any work together about how we can do an immediate almost first hit but then have a longer term strategy about how we move forward?

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes, and that is essentially in this document here. The first project within this document is a pilot project, and that is around contacting our Airbnbs and other short-term rental owners and working with them on what is the appetite to change from short term to long term. Part of that will be around: 'You own a holiday house, essentially. We're in a real pickle with being able to keep up with visitor demand because we can't staff these businesses that your visitors would love to come to'.

Mr BARTON: It is going to have an impact.

Ms BURRIDGE: Exactly. That is right. So that is the first part of the project. Now that obviously needs funding. We do not have, as a small rural council, resources to be able to do that, so it is: 'What does that project actually look like?'—so what is that program and how do we deliver it—but also the resourcing of that. That is one step. I guess what we are really keen to do is to meet with people from state government on: how do we do this collaboratively? So this is really early; this document literally got put together last week. We are very early in the whole program of how do we collaboratively resolve this.

Mr BARTON: A massive challenge.

Ms BURRIDGE: Exactly.

Mr BARTON: And clearly the mental health issues too—you can see it in the people. They are tired and they are stressed.

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes.

Ms LOVELL: And it is a real conundrum between taking beds away from visitation as well when the area relies so heavily on visitation. It might be better to look at building perhaps little villages that are staff villages.

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes. I think—and we have discussed it internally; it is not necessarily captured in this document—there are a couple of things. I myself used to work up at Mount Hotham and used to manage staff accommodation, so I know exactly the pain that they are going to be going through themselves this year. Similar to the staff that you may have heard about last night, I am sure that if we had facilities that were one- or two-bedroom and shared kitchens or independent living, or whatever it may be when it is a village similar to the resorts, people would live there if they are here short term over the peak holiday period of summer. We also have a lot of housing stock that do have our elderly, and I am sure, again if we had stock of one- or two-bedroom units or an independent aged-care living facility, which we do not have, that that stock may become available. That could be for the families that are wanting to move to the area, whether it be for work or to make the tree change, and our older citizens could move into something that is more palatable in as far as if it is an

aged-care facility, you know, perhaps you have got services on site; you have got independent living, but it is a much smaller property to have to look after. That is an issue as well because we do not have that smaller stock.

Ms LOVELL: Downsizing is a good start.

Ms BURRIDGE: That is right. Yes, so there are a number of bubbles that could help resolve this issue—not all of it is captured in here; there are a lot of bubbles—but how do we capture all of those bubbles and work to solve it?

Mr BARTON: How do we do it quickly?

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that. I have one question going on from the discussion we have had. It seems the council is, in some respects, in a bit of a fortunate challenge. You have got supply-side issues rather than demand-side issues. What is the appetite of the local council to encourage, I guess, private investment, like we see in big metropolitan cities, in subdivisions or land releases to meet the supply shortages? We have seen it in a lot of regional areas—in Ballarat, Bendigo and many other places—where there have been subdivisions or new land releases. Is there an appetite from council to do that and to see an increase in the population permanently of the Alpine shire, or not really?

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes, there is, and that work is being done through the land development use strategy at the moment. I think broadly we have got a limitation on the land that is actually available, so that is an issue as well. So whether that is rezoning of land and planning schemes, there is a whole piece of work that needs to be done, and that will be discovered by our land development use strategy which is happening right now.

The CHAIR: I might pass to Mr Quilty. He has got a question.

Mr QUILTY: I might ask you my speed limit question. At our previous hearings the committee put a recommendation that most regional roads have their speed limits cut because the government cannot spend the money to maintain them. What will be the economic impact if most of the roads in the shire are cut to 80 k's an hour?

Ms BURRIDGE: Apart from the community getting a bit upset, I do not think it would necessarily affect tourism. It would be the community that would get upset if that was to occur.

The CHAIR: We have got time for a couple more questions. Does anyone have a final question to ask?

Ms LOVELL: Would you be able to just elaborate a little bit on what is in the housing strategy? Because it will be really interesting to hear.

Ms BURRIDGE: Sure. Absolutely.

Ms LOVELL: I mean, I know that it is the number one issue for Bright as a barrier to tourism, really.

Ms BURRIDGE: That is right.

Ms LOVELL: It is a barrier to businesses operating.

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes. The key worker housing pilot is the very first project that I spoke about before. Essentially just running through those particular steps, we would be asking property owners to release unused or under-utilised property onto the long-term rental market; establishing a register of key workers who need accommodation, so that is a gap—we do not understand fully what that looks like, it is anecdotal at the moment; then it would be a matter of matching key workers with that accommodation, and that would be a function that we see that council would resource somehow through funding available; and providing a rental subsidy to key workers in need to maintain that market value for those owners, because I think it may be a bit of a hard task to say to a short-term rental property owner ‘Can you change from that to this?’ when obviously there is a large gap between what they would be earning on the short-term rental market to the long-term.

The pipeline of projects that we have includes the land development use strategy that I mentioned earlier, an affordable action housing plan, housing needs analysis and survey, and then a housing strategy and implementation, and that is that collaborative piece.

Ms LOVELL: And is there an ask of government in that? Do you know what that ask of government looks like?

Ms BURRIDGE: There is. We would be seeking 100 per cent funding for the key worker affordable housing pilot, so that is the first project; 100 per cent funding for the top-up funding required for key workers that are matched with that accommodation to ensure that their housing is affordable for 12 months; and then 50 per cent funding for the strategic planning work that needs to occur.

Ms LOVELL: Right. Excellent. Thank you. I also just wanted to ask one more. There has got to be a balance at some point. You talked about businesses being fatigued, but if we stop encouraging visitors to the region, businesses will fold, so where is that balance? Lee asked the question about extending the vouchers through the winter, which I think is imperative that we do so that we keep tourists in Victoria rather than seeing them going to Queensland et cetera, and that means attracting more tourists here. We do not want to do things that are detrimental to businesses either, but it is detrimental not to have tourists, so where is the balance? How do we strike that, and should we continue those vouchers?

Ms BURRIDGE: I think the business owner fatigue is around having shortage of staff, so if we can resolve this, if the key worker housing pilot program works, if we have some impact there, that automatically means that there are more staff. So it is that staff shortage that is causing that business fatigue. If I talk to any business right now and say, 'Have you made money out of the last period of time?', a lot of them are recording that they have had their best summer ever.

Ms LOVELL: That is great.

Ms BURRIDGE: Exactly. There is certainly not that barrier of, 'We don't want any more visitors'. If we can resolve the staff issue and they can have more staff, it means that they are not having to work in their business; they can work on their business and extend their hours and not have to close for a couple of days a week. So I think we can find the balance there, but we need to resolve that bit there first.

Ms LOVELL: Obviously this is not going to be resolved for this winter, probably not this summer; it is going to take a while if you are going to build stuff or change people's business model for their rental property. Is there something that can be done in the interim? Is there some portable accommodation that can be brought in, like we do for bushfires et cetera, to help you through the next 18 months?

Ms BURRIDGE: Sure. This is where council is identifying council land that is available that may be able to facilitate short-term accommodation. We have been speaking to a tiny house developer. When we think about staff accommodation and go back to that one-, two-bedroom unit, that may actually fit that criteria. So we have not gone very far down the line on that one, but we are working on that one now. The pain that is in place now could very well go on for a little bit longer. And as I mentioned earlier, our occupancy rates over weekends are at 100 per cent until the end of June, so this pain is just going to keep on going. What is actually happening now is that some of our businesses are having to close two days a week to be able to sustain their own personal welfare and those staff so that we do not lose more staff as a result of burnout et cetera. So that is not servicing the visitors, but what they are actually doing is coordinating amongst themselves to make sure that we have not got every business shut on a Monday and a Tuesday.

Ms LOVELL: I have noticed that it is really difficult to find somewhere for a Wednesday or a Thursday. Those are obviously the quieter days. Many of them are closed on Wednesday and Thursday night, and people are not taking bookings. Ginger Baker is closed all month for evenings.

The CHAIR: I might pass to Mr Quilty to ask the final question.

Mr QUILTY: Again it is around accommodation. Is the council considering allowing granny flats, caravans and other accommodation in people's backyards as a short-term or medium-term solution as well?

Ms BURRIDGE: Yes, that is another consideration at the moment, to be able to do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that, Elaine. Again I wish to thank you for that very interesting discussion, and you have been quite insightful on the challenges faced by Alpine Shire Council. On that point our committee will now go to a 15-minute break.

Witness withdrew.