

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Tuesday, 29 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Jaala Pulford, MLC, Minister for Small Business,

Mr Simon Phemister, Secretary, and

Ms Ylva Carosone, Executive Director, Small Business Victoria, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. We again welcome Minister Pulford, this time for consideration of the small business portfolio.

We again invite you to make a 5-minute presentation. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms PULFORD: So, obviously this last 12 months has been exceptionally challenging for many small businesses, and our every effort in this portfolio has been about providing support and advice and doing so as quickly as we can, but also we have spent a lot of time and effort on helping people navigate changing rules in a really rapidly changing environment. I just want to take a moment, because I am sure that we will spend much of the next half hour talking about those that have been terribly impacted and that are struggling and that are seeking government support or have received government support, but I just want to acknowledge the businesses that have demonstrated great resilience and great ingenuity. It has been a delight to meet them and to work with them and to hear about new systems, new business models and new ways to find customers. Some small businesses have benefited from a redistribution of economic activity, and you would all be familiar with the experience of thriving suburban strips at the expense—as we all know, at the awful expense—of businesses in Melbourne’s CBD. The trade that used to go to travel agents is now going to jewellers and to home renovations. There has been a shocking, jarring redistribution of economic activity. Of course the thing that we can provide for our small business community that is most important to them above all is a certain business environment to operate in, and I just want to congratulate all of our small business operators that I have worked with and for over the last 12 months for their effort. I think they are to be congratulated and they are to be thanked for the considerable sacrifice that many of them have made.

On the next slide, this has of course been a huge feature of our work in the portfolio. I know that you will have gone through a number of these programs and the arrangements for them earlier in the day with Minister Pakula, but we have supported and will continue to support our small businesses throughout what will continue to be a challenging environment for some time. I think Australia’s fully vaccinated rate is now nearing 5 per cent, which means that we have still got a really challenging environment to operate in, but it was good to see national cabinet meeting considering how we can create that vaccine certainty both of supply but also of demand.

The department has hosted many, many Q and A sessions as well. It has been—well, I would not always say a pleasure; some of them have been incredibly challenging in incredibly challenging times—very valuable to have been able to participate in large numbers of them and hear from people directly about the circumstances that they are living through and the challenges that they are dealing with.

If we could just go to slide two, this answers the question that Mr Riordan had in the employment session earlier. These are some of the things that are available to all businesses, employing and non-employing, and these are some of the programs that I have had primary carriage of: the Commercial Tenancy Relief Scheme and its extension, the Small Business Commission mediation service. They have done a superb job of moving everything online and dealing with the phenomenal increase in demand, and Judy O’Connell, our outgoing small business commissioner, and her team are to be congratulated for their efforts. I look forward to sharing with you the details of the new small business commissioner who will fill Judy’s big shoes in the not-too-distant future when that recruitment process has completed. I am sure all MPs are very familiar with these business support packages, so I will not dwell on those too much. But each of these programs has supported thousands upon thousands of businesses. The Small Business Commission mediation service had a surge in demand—an increase of 65 per cent, all conducted online—and has provided critically important support and also mediation services, and those are continuing even though CTRS has concluded.

If we could jump to the next slide, this slide has a number of initiatives that continue to provide support to our small business operators—those that are growing, those that are struggling and those in between. And I have got the bell, but the second-final slide talks about support to regional businesses. The final slide is on some of the other programs that are running. But I am sure all good local members will be well familiar with these because you will be talking to people about them all day, every day.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Can I refer you to budget paper 3, page 88, and noting the impact of COVID-19, could you explain how the business recovery and resilience mentoring program is helping businesses recover from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Ms PULFORD: Government support in terms of business grants and programs now is in excess of \$7 billion in all of Victoria but Melbourne in particular. The experience of that second wave last year presented a phenomenal challenge to everyone who was impacted by it. The business recovery and resilience mentoring program though is a terrific program. It is being delivered by the Victorian chamber. It involves four 2-hour mentoring sessions with an experienced professional, and the business owner or operator gets to choose their mentor. You cannot just sort of grab somebody randomly off the street, but there are a few people available for somebody participating in the program to choose from—they can find somebody that they sort of like the look and feel of. And the program offers tailored guidance on business recovery, so cost reduction, debt, cash flow management, discussions and contemplation of market transformation—so how COVID-19 has triggered or accelerated or declined market changes. Digital literacy and engagement are of course very important when the public health imperative is to keep people apart. Many, many businesses—think about catering, restaurants, pubs, the events sector—exist to bring people together, and the public health advice says we cannot bring people together, so they are obviously among those most profoundly impacted. There is market and supply chain diversification, and re-skilling and retraining. The program has been really popular. Thousands of people participated in it—four sessions spread out over a couple of months. So people can do their session, reflect, work on their plan, go back and do their next and so on. So, yes, I thank the people at the Victorian chamber for delivering this for us.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent. And how does the program actually work in practice?

Ms PULFORD: Well, like lots of things, online or in person. In its early days a lot of the sessions were online, but people who are interested in participating in the program can do an expression of interest through the Victorian chamber's website, and our website has links to how to connect to it. It is open to owners of small businesses with less than 20 full-time employees. Sole traders are eligible; partnerships, private companies and trusts as well. So it has a very broad eligibility, and we have been really pleased to have so many people participate in the program.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent. Okay. How many small business owners have participated? You said 'many'. Do you know specifically?

Ms PULFORD: Yes. So the latest update I have on this is a few weeks back. There had been at 14 May 2611 expressions of interest; 1703 businesses had started participating by completing the online business diagnostic tool; 1670 of those had been sent a choice of mentors; 1037 businesses were matched with mentors; and 2739 free monitoring sessions had been delivered at 14 May. So I reckon all of those numbers would be a bit higher than that now.

Ms TAYLOR: Fair enough, thank you. Could you also share with the committee some specific examples of small business owners who have actually benefited from the program?

Ms PULFORD: The chief executive of the Victorian chamber, Paul Guerra, and I visited a gym in Pakenham to mark the occasion that was the first business completing the program, so the owner there, Rebecca, was the first person to see the program through from beginning to end—an indoor gym that mainly catered to children, so really impacted by school at home and the cessation of indoor activities. It is quite a big space, so I am sure she is up and going again now, which would be great. She said that it had been a really good thing for her to be able to do when she was not able to operate and trade, because she had time to work on the business when she could not work in it, and she found it to be really beneficial. She said her and her mentor had developed a really good rapport and they were able to come up with some new strategies. She was broadening

her horizons and her ideas in terms of potential new customers, new clients and new networks, using the existing networks to reach out, and if I recall also she focused efforts quite a bit on a better and more expansive digital footprint as well.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent.

Ms PULFORD: In Pakenham, that was.

Ms TAYLOR: What was that?

Ms PULFORD: In Pakenham, that business.

Ms TAYLOR: In Pakenham, yes. Thank you very much. I think there has been quite a bit of discussion about, further to your point, the impact on mental health and wellbeing. Could you explain how the business mental health and wellbeing support program has been helping small business owners—budget paper 3, page 88, I should say—stay healthy and prosper through the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recovery?

Ms PULFORD: The genesis of this program really comes from some conversations I had with business community leaders in the really early days of the portfolio, so sort of imagine the first week in July last year. The second wave had not begun. There was a level of optimism and I think excitement that we were past the worst of it after our initial lockdown through March and April and of course countless stories of people experiencing really profound distress. This is so dislocating for everybody's lives, and I do not think there would be too many people who have not felt some of that pressure and some of that stress.

In discussions that I was having with business community leaders, we would often talk about, 'Why would I call a mental health support hotline? Those people won't know anything about what it's like to run a business', and conversely, 'I am feeling completely overwhelmed at home, at work. My staff are looking to me for keeping everybody's spirits high. If I call this small business service, they're just going to give me a whole bunch of tax advice or business advice, and what I actually need is this mental health support'. So it was those sorts of conversations that were the genesis for this program, and so what we have done is in those business organisations, a whole lot of business organisations, we have embedded mental health professionals.

Then we have stood up this phone service that runs long hours—9.00 am till 10.00 pm, Monday to Friday, and then full days on Saturday and Sunday as well—and what we have got is people who are mental health and wellbeing counsellors and experts but who are trained in or understand and know, because of their own background and experience, about the additional pressures of running a small business. So it has been very much designed with our small business community, and I have had some pretty good feedback from organisations like local chambers and different industry organisations that have had a person embedded in their organisation. When they ring for some financial advice or some business support advice or advice on restrictions or just to talk to somebody because it is such a pressure cooker situation, then the person they have been talking to—I give you an example from my local chamber of commerce, the person at Commerce Ballarat—can say, 'Oh, yes, hang on a sec; I am just going to pop you on the phone to this person, who is with us working in our organisation, here all the time, living and breathing our reality, understanding our members,' and be able to kind of pick all of that up. So it is sort of, you know, creating an integrated approach to overcome that problem that a mental health professional would not know about running a small business and a small business person would not know about a mental health problem, which was the perception that was stopping people from asking for help.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, excellent. Can you tell us a bit more about embedding of mental health practitioners with industry peak bodies and chambers of commerce?

Ms PULFORD: Yes. So I gave you my Ballarat example, my local example. Mental health clinicians have been embedded in nine industry peak bodies and chambers: Kinaway; Be.Bendigo; the Geelong chamber; Commerce Ballarat, as I said; the Victorian chamber; the Australian Retailers Association; the Australian Hotels Association; the Hair and Beauty Industry Association; and the Victorian Tourism Industry Council.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. First to you, Mr Phemister, again, if I may. The minister quite rightly pointed out there were a lot of crossovers between some of the earlier questions I had. The first crossover I have got is in fact the slide presentation. The slide presentation between this portfolio and the one we spoke of earlier were quite similar. In fact slide 3 was almost identical, except in slide 3 earlier today when it was put up with the—

Mr PHEMISTER: Business costs.

Mr RIORDAN: It was dealing with the business costs assistance program. Your department said earlier that it was a \$391.2 million program. Slide 3 in this presentation now has only got it as a \$379 million program. I am just wondering where the \$12 million was and whether that is just a mistake or whether there has actually been a cut to that program.

Mr PHEMISTER: Thanks, but they are actually not my slides, Mr Riordan, they are the minister's slides, so I cannot—

Mr RIORDAN: Presumably they come from your department.

Mr PHEMISTER: The ministers prepare slides for—

Mr RIORDAN: Okay.

Mr PHEMISTER: But I can tell you business costs—

Members interjecting.

Mr PHEMISTER: I am sorry, I do not have Minister Pakula's in front of me. I can clarify, though. Business costs assistance. Thank you.

Mr NEWBURY: Same dot point.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr RIORDAN: The slides are basically the same.

Mr PHEMISTER: I cannot read it, I am sorry. Business costs assistance: so there are two BCAP programs that have run recently; there is BCAP1 and BCAP2. I can clarify the amounts for you. So BCAP2, as per Minister Pulford's presentation, is \$379 million, and BCAP1, which preceded BCAP2, funnily enough—

Mr NEWBURY: So it's Pakula.

Mr PHEMISTER: Sorry?

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you make it confusing when you interrupt.

Mr RIORDAN: So they are two different programs.

Ms PULFORD: Well, they are two different rounds, yes, so they are different. They have different eligibility.

Mr PHEMISTER: It is two different rounds, so BCAP1 and BCAP2—and I am sorry, I am doing my best to read it, I apologise—

Mr RIORDAN: They were both called 'round two', that is all.

Mr PHEMISTER: Okay, so there is BCAP1 and BCAP2, and without Minister Pakula's slides in front of me, I cannot tell you exactly what that was referring to. I am happy to take on notice—

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, if you could, please, just clarify whether that is—

Mr PHEMISTER: Clarify BCAP1 and BCAP2. And can I just add one extra point as well: there have also been top-up rounds for particular types of assistance.

Ms PULFORD: Yes.

Mr PHEMISTER: So it might be bringing together a BCAP plus a top-up, but I will certainly run that to ground when I return to the committee.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, thank you.

Ms PULFORD: I think also it is worth observing that these programs are all, as you would expect, put together quickly in the period immediately after restrictions are determined in a way that is as responsive as it can be to those that are most impacted. So eligibility for BCAP1 and BCAP2 differs, but I was just going to make the point that the amounts that are announced are best endeavours to assess demand, and so these programs are not typically cut off if demand exceeds the original allocation. So some of them have had demand that has exceeded the original, some have had less, and there has been a process throughout to reconcile and reallocate.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. Thanks for that explanation, Minister. I have got to get through some questions. My next question is: we talked about what support you had for sole traders. You talked about the Sole Trader Support Fund, which was part of your presentation. Again I say to you: what advice did you receive that saw anyone who was a sole trader who operated from home or who was not registered for GST not being worthy of any support? And I remind you that this includes a very wide range of self-employed people, such as hairdressers, therapists, photographers, a whole range of people, and particularly I speak of photographers; I seem to have a lot of sole-trader photographers in my electorate.

Ms PULFORD: So do I.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, they have not only been out of work for that four weeks but they have had a long train of work cancelled, as have many other event specialists. This program offers no support for them whatsoever. Can you explain why that is?

Ms PULFORD: So the eligibility for this program, BCAP1 and BCAP2, is the same as the eligibility that is in the policy announcement of the Leader of the Opposition, the \$1500 grants that I assume you are familiar with. The Victorian government does not have available to it income information, so I have taken the committee through a number of programs that we have available—

Mr RIORDAN: But you have not picked income, Minister, you have picked where they operate their business from, so on what basis have you made policy that says that if you operate your perfectly good business that you can live off normally from your home, you are not worthy of any support? What basis have you made that decision on?

Ms PULFORD: No, no, so—

Mr RIORDAN: No, no—yes, yes, yes—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you refrain, please, and allow the minister to the opportunity to answer both your propositions and your questions.

Ms PULFORD: Registration for GST, as distinct from payment of GST, is the most effective mechanism available to the Victorian government that does not have all of the information around income tax and income that the commonwealth government has. And the New South Wales government today have announced their business support package—the same criteria. The state opposition's business support package policy—the same criteria. It is the best way that we can ascertain—

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, you are deflecting. I just asked: what was your advice?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are interrupting. Could you please allow the minister to finish.

Ms PULFORD: Hang on, just let me finish. This is really important.

Mr RIORDAN: It is important.

Ms PULFORD: Yes, and we have had a lot of inquiries from people about this, particularly—

Mr RIORDAN: You have ignored them for 18 months.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, allow the minister to finish, please.

Ms PULFORD: No, that is actually not true. And so—

Mr RIORDAN: It is. Would you like to find a home business that you have helped?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms PULFORD: There is a distinction that we have sought to make between businesses that are trading and businesses that are not trading, and we have—

Mr RIORDAN: Are you saying businesses operating at home are not trading?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are not allowing the minister to complete the explanation for you.

Ms PULFORD: No, I am not saying that, and there is nothing in the criteria for any of our programs that distinguishes between businesses at home and businesses not at home in BCAP1 and BCAP2.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, I will read it out to you. It says:

Operate from a commercial premises or location (and not a residential premises) ...

You clearly rule out—

Ms PULFORD: You have changed your question midway.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I have asked you from day dot. You have not had any support for businesses that operate from home.

Ms PULFORD: You have been asking about BCAP, and now you have switched to something completely different.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I said to you quite clearly ‘sole trader support fund’.

Ms PULFORD: No, you did not. You were asking about BCAP.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I was asking about the sole trader support fund. I just read it out to you.

Ms PULFORD: What would you like to know about the sole trader support fund?

Mr RIORDAN: I am just asking about any support that you have—

Ms PULFORD: No, but you were asking about GST eligibility.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, Minister. Any policy, anything that you have got that assists someone who operates from home, please tell me what it is. You put it up there, it was called the sole trader support fund, and it clearly said it does not help them.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, there is no need to be so aggressive. Could you be clear in your questions and allow the minister the opportunity to answer them.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, we might hold up flashcards, Minister. Would you like flashcards?

Ms PULFORD: No, I would just again—

Mr RIORDAN: What help have you got for home businesses?

Ms PULFORD: Oh, shoosh for a sec! Stop being so childish.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you please stop yelling at people.

Ms PULFORD: Chair, if I could just respond, because I have not been able to get a word in. There are multiple programs that I have outlined in the course of answers to questions and in the presentation—and even in the employment portfolio question, when Mr Riordan got his hearings in a muddle—that businesses that are sole traders and businesses that are self-employing and businesses that operate from home are eligible for. Now, I would encourage Mr Riordan, like every other decent MP in this Parliament, to familiarise—

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, I just read it out to you. It says if you operate from home, you do not get sole trader support. That is your fund.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr RIORDAN: Do not give the minister this extra time to waffle on with stuff that is just not true.

Ms PULFORD: Just because you are not interested in helping small businesses.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I am giving the minister time to answer the propositions you have put because you have—

Mr RIORDAN: That is your policy.

Ms PULFORD: We are interested in helping small businesses. Your question—

Mr RIORDAN: No, you are not. You have done nothing for 18 months. If you operate a business from home, you get zip from you, and you have done nothing about it.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, you are screaming. It is not acceptable to scream for 5 minutes and not allow the minister the opportunity—

Mr RIORDAN: Well, the minister has been given 5 minutes to waffle on, and she has waffled on and still has not answered the question—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, the minister has not had an opportunity to answer you—

Mr RIORDAN: and has given the same diatribe she gave us earlier.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, please stop screaming at me and at the witnesses.

Ms PULFORD: I am sorry, Chair, but can I just say that I think the Victorian small businesses that have experienced extraordinary hardship through this last 15 months frankly deserve something better than this—

Mr RIORDAN: You are not wrong, Minister. They absolutely deserve better.

Ms PULFORD: completely misguided line of questioning, obfuscation—

Mr RIORDAN: I could not have said it better myself.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I ask that you control yourself.

Ms PULFORD: and frankly, complete dishonesty and misrepresentation of eligibility for programs.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, it is your webpage.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr RIORDAN: It is your webpage.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr RIORDAN: It is your website. I have not made it up. It is not the New South Wales's one. It is not anyone else's.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired, and I ask that you control yourself.

Mr RIORDAN: It is yours. It is the one you directed us to in your presentation. I thought that could not be clearer.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired, and I ask that you control yourself, please.

Ms PULFORD: I do not know that you are as foolish as you are pretending to be, but if you are, I really fear for the people of Polwarth.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Mr RIORDAN: Why?

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Ms PULFORD: Because they deserve someone who is not a dill representing them.

Mr RIORDAN: I am representing the people of Polwarth and the hundreds of emails that I get from small businesses in my electorate that you refuse to support and have not given a—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I ask that you control yourself. It is not acceptable to scream at a witness for 5 minutes.

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr Limbrick has the call.

Mr NEWBURY: Chair, on a point of order—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: For about the last hour, on several occasions, you have interjected with particular descriptors when it comes to the opposition which are hyper-partisan, which characterise people and their behaviour, which are frankly outrageous, and if I were—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I do not need to hear further—

Mr NEWBURY: No. Excuse me. I will finish the point of order—

The CHAIR: No—

Mr NEWBURY: Of course you will. You will talk over me.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I have heard you on the point of order, and I do not need to hear you any further.

Mr NEWBURY: But if I were in the chamber, I would be asking for a withdrawal. It is outrageous. It is hyper-partisan, and I have no faith in your chairmanship.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I have heard you on the point of order, and I do not need to hear you any further. It is not acceptable at this committee table to scream and yell aggressively—

Mr NEWBURY: Here we go. Here you go. Here you go. You have done it again.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: Sorry, I have no faith in your chairmanship. You are hyper-partisan.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you have spoken on the point of order, and I do not need to hear you any further.

Mr NEWBURY: The words you are using are outrageous.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: I have no faith in your chairmanship. It is outrageous.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury! You are—

Mr NEWBURY: What you are doing is outrageous.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are demonstrating my point, which is that you continue to rudely scream over the top of the Chair and the witnesses and the committee members—

Mr NEWBURY: Please do not use words like that. That is completely untrue. The fact that I have raised a point of order is completely within my right.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, your behaviour speaks for itself.

Mr NEWBURY: Using a descriptor of that nature is outrageous.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I ask that you control yourself.

Mr NEWBURY: Please stop using descriptors like that. It is completely unacceptable.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury!

Mr NEWBURY: A Chair, an impartial Chair, does not behave in that way.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, control yourself.

Mr NEWBURY: Excuse me. Please stop. I have asked you repeatedly to stop using language of that nature.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I am chairing this meeting, and if members are out of order, I will ask them to control themselves.

Mr NEWBURY: Fine. Then all I am asking is for you to use impartial language in the way that you do that. That is all I am asking.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, you are out of order.

Ms PULFORD: Would anybody like to talk about small business?

The CHAIR: I think Mr Limbrick would have some questions. Mr Limbrick, you have the call.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. I would love to talk about small business. Thank you again, Minister. I would like to focus on one thing that I have had lots of contact about and I am assuming I am going to get lots of contact about in the future. Apart from businesses being shut down, one of the things that has really, really annoyed small businesses when they have been shut down and had these restrictions on their operations is not understanding the rationale behind the directions. Not only do they have to suffer these hardships, they do not understand the rationale behind the hardships. An example the other week was the difference between density limits or the number of people allowed at a funeral and a wedding, and people were asking about it. The media asked about it—

Ms PULFORD: A cafe versus a shop? Yes.

Mr LIMBRICK: and then the CHO came out and said it was to do with hugs, and that just drove people wild. People have been asking me. I do not know the answers. And the government has been saying now that all the health advice is in the state of emergency extension reports. I sent that to a few small businesses, and that just made them even more wild when they read through that. What are you going to do in the future to try and communicate the rationale better for these restrictions, assuming that we are going to have more of them?

Ms PULFORD: Yes. So obviously I do not make the—

Mr LIMBRICK: I know that you do not make them, but—

Ms PULFORD: Yes. I do not make the call on the public health advice, but I understand the frustration and occasionally the confusion around this. Every time there is a change in restrictions I spend hours and hours in online round tables doing questions and answers with people about these very things, and so I understand and I appreciate—I completely understand—how maddening and frustrating it is when people cannot. You know, people just want to be at work, right? Our small business community, they are in it because they love it. They are in it because they want to be in charge of their own destiny. They want to be providing a service or selling goods. They are so passionate about what they do, and it is really upsetting and it is really frustrating that they cannot do it, and if they can do it, that they have to do it within these rules that exist. And so it is absolutely incumbent upon all of us to take every opportunity we can to explain that as best we can.

Now, without being an epidemiologist, there are limits to how we do that, but we also have a team of people set up in our department that try to assist as best they can people to navigate the changes and to respond and to adapt to them. I would also make the point that I think we have had some recent changes with QR code checking in now being much more widely required and COVID marshals in workplaces. In my observation just in the last few days since we have had those new arrangements in place, there have been exceptionally high levels of compliance, and at each of the forums I do I am always mindful to thank people for their forbearance as we navigate this. The things that we need to do—and please do not anyone explode—are better quarantine and higher vaccination rates. These are so important for business confidence and business certainty and for us to be able to get back to something a bit more like what we had before the pandemic. The chief health officer is available to the media on most days, or his deputy, to respond to those questions about the rationale. That is probably as well as I can answer that for you without actually being inside those people's heads.

Mr LIMBRICK: All right. Thank you. Another issue that many businesses have relayed to me, and they have felt so frustrated they have taken to the streets—I have brought this up in Parliament and I am sure you are aware of all this—but I think the genesis of that frustration was that they felt that no-one was listening to them. This is the feedback I have been getting from lots of different businesses. Now, I know that you have talked about a business round table, but what are you going to do going forward to ensure that the voices of these really small businesses—often they are one-man or one-woman operations—are being heard?

Ms PULFORD: I have had lots of questions in the house, including from you, about individual businesses or groups of businesses through their local organisation or their industry organisation, and on each occasion I have been asked to meet with them I do. There are, what, 620 000 or so small businesses operating or registered in Victoria. I cannot say I have met with them all, but when they want to meet with us we endeavour to do that and to be as accessible to people as possible. I know often when I meet with people in that situation, and particularly the questions that have come through the Parliament process, people say that—they say, 'But you aren't hearing us and you don't understand', and what I say to them often is, 'We do hear you and we do understand. It's not that we don't'.

We have a group of people—and Simon can talk about the resources dedicated to this, perhaps—in the department who all day, every day, are back and forward with Health about this particular example or this particular scenario, this particular business operation question, to just work through case by case, question by question. Some of them come in bunches via industry groups but a lot of them are individual inquiries, but I would certainly want people to know and understand that we do hear them and we see them and we understand. It is incredibly frustrating, and we thank them for their efforts. Some small businesses have weathered this well. Some have expanded and are hiring and there is a good underlying economic story about that, but for those at the sharp end of the restrictions it has been really horrific—and we know that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the small business portfolio today. We thank you and your officials very much for appearing before the committee. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request. The committee will now take a short break. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Ms PULFORD: With your forbearance, Chair, the Secretary has an answer to the question about why the slides were different on VCAT.

The CHAIR: Sure.

Mr PHEMISTER: Sorry—apologies, Minister. I tracked down the slides. Minister Pakula's did indeed include a top-up, which is a tourism top-up, so I can break it down, but Minister Pulford did not and Minister Pakula, as minister for tourism, did. That is the difference.

The CHAIR: Thank you. This hearing is adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.