

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and events sectors  
Casey City Council submission

**Please note this is an officer's submission from the City of Casey and the submission has not been endorsed by Council.**

## Summary

This submission calls for an investment in events to take a place-based approach to address current gaps in access and equity in pandemic recovery strategies. Outer metropolitan growth areas require Federal and State Government investment in community infrastructure and programming to support rapidly growing and diverse populations for both community and economic outcomes.

## Key Recommendation

Establish a Federal and state government partnership with local governments to fund creative-led community response and recovery strategies to the pandemic which are place-based and prioritise areas of greatest need.

## City of Casey - Context

### City of Casey

The City of Casey has the largest population of any municipality in Victoria at over 353,872 residents. The City of Casey is the fourth fastest growing local government area in Australia. It is projected that by 2041, Casey will be home to 550,000 people.

The largest cohort in Casey is young children from birth to four years old (31,100 people). Over half of all households within the municipality include children (45% couples with children, 11% single parent with children). 23% of Casey's population is people aged 0-14 years, compared to 18% as the metropolitan average.

The City of Casey is home to one of the largest numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents in metropolitan Melbourne.

Casey is one of the most diverse LGAs in Australia. Outside of Australia, the top seven countries of birth for Casey residents are India, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom, Afghanistan and New Zealand, Philippines and China. Over 38% of our residents were born overseas and over 36% speak a language other than English at home. Of those who speak a language other than English, 15% are not proficient in English. Residents speak over 140 different languages and practice more than 120 different faiths. (ABS, 2016).

68% of residents leave the municipality each day for employment opportunities. This adds to the congestion on arterial roads and reduces recreational and family time important to health and wellbeing.

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## City of Casey Community Events

As the population across the city grows and with more pressure on transport infrastructure residents have increasing expectations that they want to see a broader range of event experiences in the suburbs rather than having to travel distances to enjoy this. These experiences could be provided by Council, the community or the commercial sector. Before the pandemic Council approved over 60 major events a year that were delivered by community groups and businesses. In addition to this Council would deliver an additional 10 major events for the community (excluding those held at Bunjil Place). Many Council facilities such as Community Hubs and tourist attractions such as the Old Cheese Factory, Wilson Botanic Park Berwick and Myuna Farm have high levels of visitation of local and regional residents.

A significant outcome during community consultation has been recognition of the importance of social connection and the need to ensure that events are accessible and welcoming to people from all cultures and abilities.

## Bunjil Place

Bunjil Place, opened in 2017, is a unique outer metropolitan cultural facility, located in Narre Warren, 35km south east of Melbourne CBD. It presents and promotes the best local, Australian and international art that engages, challenges and inspires our diverse audiences. We house venues for the performing and visual arts, meeting and function rooms, an award-winning public library, and a variety of civic services, all brought together under one spectacular roof. Bunjil Place is also home to the outdoor plaza and big screen, which has become a familiar and recognisable community and cultural space.

Since opening in 2017 we have welcomed over 3.5 million unique visitors to Bunjil Place. Bunjil Place makes over 75% of our community feel proud of their community, and 80% agree that Bunjil Place contributes to making the Casey a creative place to live.

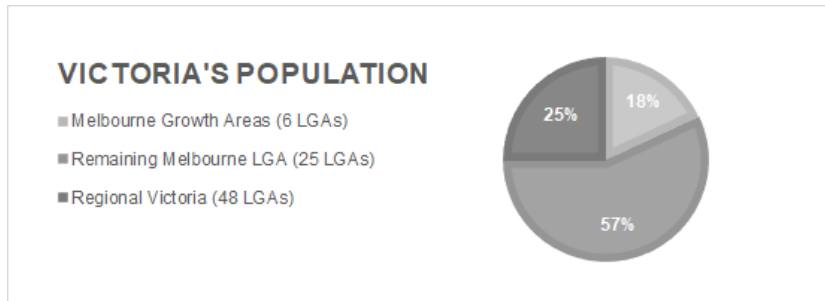
## Outer Metropolitan Growth Areas

Victoria's growth areas have higher proportions of low socio-economic conditions, limited local job opportunities, social isolation and disproportionate negative impacts of COVID. The communities have a higher proportion of children and families and cultural diversity compared to the rest of metropolitan Melbourne.

## High and rapid population growth

Victoria's six outer metropolitan growth area local government communities (Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Whittlesea and Wyndham) have a combined population of 1.217 million people and account for 24.5% of Melbourne's population. Residents of these six outer metropolitan growth LGAs are 18% of Victoria's population. By comparison, Victoria's regional population accounts for 26% of state population.

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### Conditions of Victoria's outer metropolitan growth communities

These communities are the current and potential audiences and participants for arts and culture and experience. The following conditions are reported across all our communities:

- High levels of engagement with arts and culture but low levels of access to local cultural experiences.
- Low socio-economic conditions.
- Limited local job opportunities and long commute times leading to time poor individuals and families.
- High proportions of new culturally diverse communities and refugee communities.
- High proportions of children and young people.
- Disproportionate negative impacts of COVID-19.
- Issues of accessibility and social connectedness.
- Physical disconnect between the outer metropolitan growth areas with other parts of Melbourne and access to critical infrastructure, resulting in relative disadvantage.
- Community indicators show that they are geographically isolated from social programs and suffer from the inevitable social consequences associated with this.

### Limited arts and events ecologies

Rapid population growth has led to underdeveloped cultural ecosystems, including:

- Limited opportunities for arts and events participation.
- High demand for the existing limited cultural infrastructure, facilities and community spaces, many of which are not fit-for-purpose and in need of upgrade.
- No established organisations locally based.
- High demand for local government arts and events services.
- High transport costs and poor public transport networks which limit inner city organisations working in growth areas and make it difficult for residents to access inner city cultural events.
- An increase in creatives moving from the inner city to growth areas for affordability, who are travelling great distances to work and collaborate.

### The impact of COVID-19 on Bunjil Place

From March 2020, Bunjil Place has lost significant income across commercial partnerships, commercial venue hire, café income, and box office. In the 2020/2021 Financial Year we have

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Casey City Council submission

downgraded income projections by over \$1.8 million due to the Covid-19 closures. It is expected with the February lockdown that the true income impact will be higher.

We had over 60 events cancelled in our performance spaces, and 70 events that were rescheduled. The rescheduled events are still currently being rescheduled and will impact future event programming well into 2022. In 2020 we refunded over 10,094 tickets and a further 9,300 tickets that have been credited for future rescheduled performances.

Our earned income supports free and low-cost events programming for our community, as such our capacity to meet the programming demand for our community has been significantly impacted. In the 2020/2021 FY we have downgraded event programming expenses by over \$600,000.

As a local government we have been unable to retain our casual labour force during this time since we are unable to receive jobkeeper. We estimate our local casual arts employees will lose over \$700,000 in wages for this financial year alone.

Compared to the latest national data (published in August 2020), Casey residents have reported feeling a significantly higher range of negative emotional states. Incidence of feeling these negative emotions has significantly increased throughout 2020, suggesting mental health is an increasingly significant issue for residents.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted our community through job losses, income loss, and negative impacts to health and well-being. Casey has reported 43% of households have been negatively impacted financially compared to the national average of 31%.

Our community wants to engage with arts and culture as soon as they can. 49% of Victorian outer metropolitan respondents to the latest Audience Outlook Monitor survey (September 2020) said they would resume attending arts and cultural events as soon as they are legally allowed.

While funding has been provided to support the creative industry and professional artists to respond and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been little or no opportunity for local government to access additional funding to employ artists and creatives in community response and recovery strategies.

## The impact of Covid-19 on City of Casey Events and our community

During the last year, with the onset of the pandemic, 49 planned events (7 of these Council managed events) were cancelled and a further 11 events transformed into a virtual format to enable them to proceed. Additionally numerous significant sporting events and activations that take place at our elite facilities such as Casey Fields were also adversely affected including AFLW matches and a Melbourne Storm trial match.

The financial impact is varied as it is dependent on the funding source and contractual arrangements that were in place with infrastructure or performance supplies. A significant

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and events sectors  
Casey City Council submission

proportion of community event cancellations would have a low financial impact as cancellation periods were managed and only a small proportion of businesses such as the food vendors and equipment hire companies would be impacted by this. Council provides a number of grants to community groups to assist them in holding their events and associated event cancellations expenses have been covered by this funding.

Employment impact have been minimal due to community event organisers being predominantly volunteers. All Council event related staff were retained and utilized to support pandemic relief and recovery tasks activations such as administering care packages to those in mandatory quarantine in their homes and supporting food relief coordination across the city.

Only in recent weeks, with the relaxation of restrictions, enabling smaller scale events to proceed have the impacts of the pandemic started to show in local event related businesses. Initial observations indicate that a quarter of known local food vendors are no longer operational and entertainers such as face painters and performers have noticeably increased their fees. Event equipment and traffic management companies are however all still operational and eager for bookings.

Council has proactively been networking with community event organisers throughout the year and many have shared significant concerns over their ability to run future events in a COVID environment, both in terms of their organisation's capacity/capability to administer an event under the Public Event Framework requirements. Concerns have also been shared regarding the financial impact of additional requirements during an event such as reduced attendance numbers and cleaning/sanitation requirements.

Community event delivery is vitally important in reinvigorating our community and supporting them through the challenging times that lay ahead. Events held in Casey tend to be free or low cost to attend. They support local residents to connect with each other and develop a sense of pride in the community that they reside in which is imperative in growth areas.

## Recommendation

Establish a Federal and state government partnership with local governments to fund event based creative-led community response and recovery strategies to the pandemic which are place-based and prioritise areas of greatest need.

### Suggested approach:

Provide Victorian Government funding opportunities to Growth Area LGAs for local creative solutions to community recovery from the COVID -19 pandemic, recognising the high proportion of vulnerable communities residing in these areas and the impact the pandemic has had on local identity and living conditions.