



Friday 16, April 2021

The Secretary
Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To Whom It May Concern

Re: Submission

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to The Legislative Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee's inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and events sectors.

Please find enclosed our submission.

Yours Sincerely,

Glenn Harvey
Acting Tourism and Major Events Manager
On behalf of the City of Greater Bendigo

*Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee – Inquiry into the
impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism and events sectors*

The City of Greater Bendigo (the City) provides this submission on the impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism and events sectors.

Like all major cities, regional centres and communities, Greater Bendigo was severely impacted by COVID-19. As a city and region that has built a successful tourism sector based on its ability to host major events and offer quality cultural experiences through the acclaimed Bendigo Art Gallery, The Capital and Ulumbarra theatres and many quality attractions, COVID-19 shocked the local economy. Sectors that rely on tourist visitation, particularly accommodation, hospitality and retail sectors, were significantly impacted as a result.

Major events and cultural attractions

The major events sector in Greater Bendigo was non-existent in 2020. The last events to be held that attracted thousands of people were the Lost Trades Fair and Bendigo International Madison acclaimed cycling and foot races. Both were held on the Labour Day long weekend in March 2020.

On March 13, 2020 the City cancelled its 150th Bendigo Easter Fair celebrations. The previous year the Bendigo Easter Festival attracted in excess of 60,000 people. A number of other independent community events around this time were also cancelled and as the year wore on, so too were events planned for later in the year and early 2021.

Last year 72 City-run events were cancelled, which resulted in an estimated loss of more than \$20M to the local economy. This does not account for the impact of lost trading hours on places like Bendigo Art Gallery and our theatres, which were unable to stage exhibitions or live performances and also have a critical role in attracting people to Greater Bendigo. It also does not consider the many events run in the community that the City may support indirectly or are run entirely independently of the City, meaning the number of events cancelled and therefore the impact on visitation was much greater.

The City has a number of cultural attractions that were forced to close. Places like Bendigo Heritage Attractions, which runs our famous Tramways, Central Deborah Gold Mine and Joss House experiences, the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion (the largest Stupa in the western world), Bendigo Pottery (Australia's oldest working pottery), Discovery, Science and Technology Centre, Bendigo Stadium, Golden Dragon Museum and many other operations that celebrate our heritage and culture.

These facilities, including local restaurants, were then impacted by the stop-start nature of re-opening.



Visitor centres - accommodation bookings and face-to-face visitation

Visitation in 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 saw the Bendigo Visitor Centre Booking Team book a total of \$1.6M and \$1.9M in accommodation respectively. The 2019/2020 financial year was down 61 per cent on 2018/2019 bookings and 2020/2021 is expected to finish similarly. The table below provides a useful summary:

Financial year	Gross booking value
FY17/18	\$1,618,922.55
FY18/19	\$1,908,779.50
FY19/20	\$741,543.02
YTD FY20/21 (until March 15, 2021)	\$347,234.88

It should also be noted that the accommodation sector locally has been very vocal about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on their businesses. The loss of JobKeeper may have a significant impact on their ability to remain open. They are very cautious about what the remainder of the year will bring and remain fearful of snap lockdowns or a third wave of infection. This is a sector that had mainly been unable to pivot during the height of the pandemic, with some pursuing take away food arrangements where possible and commercially viable as a way to maintain morale and keep staff connected to their workplace.

Below is a summary of face-to-face visitation, noting 2018/2019 was a stand-out year for visitation to Greater Bendigo due to Bendigo Art Gallery hosting a major exhibition and the Bendigo Easter Festival welcoming a new parading dragon. The first lockdown of 2020 (March – June) coincided with what is usually a busy autumn events and travel season, meaning visitation in 2019/2020 dropped 36 per cent on the previous year. Satellite visitor services that usually attend major events were also stood down, so this further impacted on visitation data.

Financial year	Face-to-face visitation Bendigo
FY17/18	100,245
FY18/19	112,715
FY19/20	72,043
YTD FY20/21 (until February 28, 2021)	23,795

In Heathcote in 2019/2020 there was a decrease of 37 per cent when compared to the previous year, with only 10,250 people coming through the doors. The first lockdown coincided with the cancellation of Heathcote on Show, which is a major event for visitation in the township and is traditionally held over the Queen’s Birthday long weekend. The loss of the Heathcote Food and Wine Festival in the first half of the current financial year has also impacted visitation heavily.

Financial year	Face-to-face visitation Heathcote
FY17/18	16,715
FY18/19	16,240
FY19/20	10,250
YTD FY20/21 (until Feb 28 th , 2021)	5,855



The City’s visitor centres stock a range of local produce and locally-made goods, and process ticket sales payments to attractions and events. Sales in the Bendigo Visitor Centre in 2019/2020 were down 38 per cent on the previous financial year. Retail values were significantly impacted by the closure of Bendigo Heritage Attractions and the cancellation of major music event Groovin the Moo. It is expected 2020/2021 figures will be similar to 2019/2020.

Financial year	Gross retail value Bendigo
FY17/18	\$332,374.44
FY18/19	\$339,064.68
FY19/20	\$210,471.73
YTD FY20/21 (until February 28, 2021)	\$128,044.58

In Heathcote it was a similar story, sales in 2019/2020 were down 31 per cent on the previous year and sales for 2020/2021 are also expected to be similar to last financial year.

Financial year	Gross retail value Heathcote
FY17/18	\$40,256
FY18/19	\$36,797
FY19/20	\$25,496
YTD FY20/21 (until March 19, 2021)	\$11,787

More broadly, statistics from Tourism Research Australia confirm visitation across the Bendigo Loddon region (covering the City of Greater Bendigo, Mount Alexander Shire Council, Loddon Shire and Central Goldfields) dropped approximately 50 per cent between December 2019 and December 2020, which resulted in a \$366M loss in expenditure across the region. It is also important to remember that as Greater Bendigo has the bulk of accommodation and events across the region, the drop in visitation and financial losses were felt most sharply in our municipality.

	2019	2020
Day trips	3,455,000	1,648,000
Day trip expenditure	\$372M	\$202M
Overnight stays	1,316,000	623,000
Overnight expenditure	\$369M	\$173M

Volunteers

The City relies on volunteers to help run its Bendigo and Heathcote Visitor Centres, Bendigo Art Gallery and The Capital and Ulumbarra theatres.

Prior to COVID-19, the Bendigo and Heathcote Visitor Centres had approximately 90 active volunteers. Volunteer services were suspended on March 17, 2020 and a return to service on March 15, 2021 has since occurred. Of the initial numbers, Heathcote has seen 10 volunteers return, some with more limited availability than before the suspension of their duties. Bendigo has had 27 return, 11 who are waiting for a vaccine before returning and 12 retirements. There are another 23



volunteers who have not yet been invited back to service at this time due to the nature of their roles (e.g. supporting train travellers and serving as event ambassadors or tour guides).

At Bendigo Venues & Events, which runs The Capital and Ulumbarra theatres, Dudley House, Engine Room and Town Hall, 80 volunteers were stood down. A core group of 25 volunteers returned in February 2021, which supports the current level of activity taking place at the venues. There have been two retirements and a small portion have not yet come back due to their age and health concerns. It is expected the City will soon need to reach out to those volunteers who are yet to re-engage or recruit new volunteers to further support venues as they return to pre-COVID-19 levels of operation.

Prior to COVID-19, Bendigo Art Gallery ran guided tours each day and the tours were delivered by volunteer guides. The tours were suspended when the State of Emergency was announced. Regular Collection Tours are yet to resume, but volunteers have now been re-inducted into the Gallery and guide introductory talks for the current *Mary Quant: Fashion Revolutionary* exhibition resumed on April 12, 2021 and will continue each Monday of the exhibition. All the Gallery's volunteer guides have returned with the exception of three who retired.

It should be noted that, anecdotally, volunteering across Greater Bendigo (not just City services) has dropped. The cohort who usually volunteer, the retiree age bracket, are not comfortable returning, have retired from volunteering or are enjoying the new-found 'freedom' of what it is like not to have a regular volunteering commitment.

Qantas flights

The daily Qantas Bendigo-Sydney service at Bendigo Airport ceased between March and December 2020. The seven-day-a-week service was used by over 2,000 people per month and was due to increase to 10 flights a week in April 2020.

During much of 2020, the City's Airport staff had decreased hours and the third-party ground handling staff, café operator and car hire operators were stood down.

The service recommenced in December 2020 but was then decreased again with border closures later that month and has not yet got back to February 2020 passenger numbers. International border closures have also stopped the growth of the RMIT pilot training academy located at Bendigo Airport due to the inability to have international students locate to Bendigo.

Bendigo Art Gallery and The Capital and Ulumbarra theatres

The City is immensely proud of the way staff adapted in our arts and cultural facilities to reach audiences during COVID-19.

It should be noted this is the one area of the City's business where some staff needed to either access their paid entitlements or take up alternate work opportunities in other parts of the organisation. No permanent part-time or full-time staff were stood down and many enjoyed working in other units, with some choosing a career change and taking on new roles following the re-deployment experience.



In 2019 Bendigo Art Gallery hosted 10 exhibitions and welcomed 190,771 people. In 2020 it hosted nine exhibitions (three available online) and welcomed only 48,213 people, a drop of 75 per cent.

Staff were able to pivot and provided some online content relating to their exhibitions, however it is not the same as visiting in person. Galleries rely on an immersive experience. Digital engagement in 2020 in some areas exceeded the previous year's engagement, as shown below, demonstrating this was a critical way for people to stay informed and access the arts during COVID-19.

Item	2019	2020
Website (page views)	949,740	345,388
Facebook (people reached)	4,415,647	3,124,550
Instagram (followers)	22,987	24,237
Vimeo / You Tube (views)	14,900	19,700

Ticket sales totalled \$308,000 in 2019 and \$0 in 2020, and donations fell from \$15,000 in 2019 to \$1,435 in 2020. Aside from the loss of revenue, COVID-19 has decreased international touring opportunities, which is what Bendigo Art Gallery builds its exhibition program around. It is acclaimed for its ability to host major international exhibitions and enjoys strong partnerships with galleries around the world, in particular the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Additional staff costs have also been incurred as a result of operating in line with COVID-safe measures.

The Capital and Ulumbarra theatres were closed for much of 2020 and reopened gradually at the beginning of 2021. More than 1,000 events, including performances, presentations, exhibitions, functions, conferences, venue tours and meetings were either cancelled or rescheduled due to COVID-19 and subsequent venue closures during 2020.

In the previous year visitation to venues (The Capital and Ulumbarra theatres, Dudley House, Engine Room and Town Hall) for the same period was approximately 102,000 to performances and 52,000 to other events.

During the closure period the entire volunteer workforce of approximately 80 people were stood down, along with a causal team of approximately 20 people.

To ensure our community could still access the arts in 2020, the City's Bendigo Venues & Events unit (which runs The Capital and Ulumbarra theatres) started *What I did last week*, which was open to anyone to make art and submit a photo online of recently completed works, ideally from the past week. In the end, 175 artists exhibited 780 works over 32 weeks and the works were published across five volumes of books.

The unit also staged a *Play at Home* initiative, which saw more than 60 local artists deliver music and comedy performances from their homes to reach an online audience of more than 50,000 people.

Three *The Way Back* concerts were broadcast over social media as a way to profile and support local artists and engage technical crews, *In the Wings* was launched across Facebook and Instagram and



interviewed stars of the performing arts, and *Dragon City Sounds* was a concert broadcast online for young people across music and health social networks as a way to promote positive mental health and wellbeing messages.

There was much discussion in 2020 about the impact of COVID-19 on the arts and the wellbeing of artists, performers and creatives. This concern for wellbeing also extends to staff that support these industries. A number of casual staff support the operations of the City's arts and culture facilities and we acknowledge the impact the pandemic and the closure of our facilities would have had on them.

Broader economy

Greater Bendigo enjoys a diverse economy, which has likely helped to soften some of the impacts of COVID-19. Although this is an anecdotal assessment, living regionally has significant benefits when living through challenges such as an international pandemic. A strong sense of community is invaluable in times like this, and we have seen that in the way residents have come together to share messages of support and hope, and engaged with successful campaigns and initiatives designed to support each other and the business community. That said, this enthusiasm cannot replace months of lost earnings and job losses, but it does help to demonstrate support and care and keep some income coming in.

Overall, at the peak of COVID-19, it was estimated that 1,300 jobs were lost across Greater Bendigo. However, sectors that benefit from discrete spending and tourism, such as retail, are still down on pre-COVID levels. Some of the negative impacts of the pandemic may have been masked by JobKeeper and the coming months will tell the extent of these impacts.

Businesses have been particularly negatively impacted by the uncertainty created by COVID-19. This was highlighted by comments that the state-wide February 2021 five-day lockdown had a greater impact on businesses than previous lockdowns, as it occurred just when business confidence was being restored.

It will be critical that should there be any further outbreaks in metropolitan Melbourne, there is a system in place that does not lockdown the rest of the state unnecessarily. That was a key challenge during the second lockdown in particular, as regional areas recovered and transmission remained stable, keeping these economies under the same restrictions as Melbourne was inequitable.

Greater Bendigo has generally relied heavily on domestic tourism and the closure of Melbourne to regional Victoria in July greatly impacted local businesses. With significant investment in the city centre through three large commercial developments along with planned hotels, this would have created a significant 'buzz' about the city and would have benefited local businesses and created opportunities to leverage off this. While there is a potential for this to happen in 2021, businesses have lost what could have been a very successful year.

As businesses are now able to operate with fewer restrictions they are faced with other challenges, particularly in having enough trained staff to meet the growing need as workers have left industries or gained other employment opportunities. This is a particular challenge in the hospitality sector where many businesses are currently seeking to recruit workers. Providing practical training

opportunities around hospitality and other areas where there is an identified need and then connecting with employment opportunities will be critical to supporting businesses in recovering from COVID-19.

To support the business community, the City adopted a flexible budget for 2020/2021 that waived a number of Local Laws fees and charges, which provided particular support to the heavily impacted hospitality and retail sectors. Residents and businesses were also able to defer rates without accruing interest. Business and community grant funding was increased, with funds targeted at supporting our creative community and helping community groups recommence activities and re-engage volunteers, and a range of free business support webinars were developed to help businesses navigate the pandemic.

Social impacts

The impact of COVID-19 on tourism and major events in Greater Bendigo needs to be understood in the context of the broader social and community impacts.

These have varied as we have progressed through several waves of lockdown over the last 12 months. The increased demand on relief services was expected and there has been a significant spike in demand for food relief, financial counselling, psychosocial support, bill relief, mental health services and other relief services, putting pressure on relief agencies and support services.

Within Greater Bendigo we have experienced three significant outbreaks, including two relating to meat processing works Don KR Castlemaine and Hazeldene's, and outbreaks linked to several schools. Many of those directly impacted have been members of CALD and refugee communities, and significant work was done across local agencies to ensure clear and timely communication that would give people the information and support they need, including establishment of helplines (Karen language hotline and City of Greater Bendigo helpline), training in using telephone interpreter services, and strong connections between response and relief agencies. All these processes required the collaboration of multiple agencies and workforces to quickly adapt to the outbreaks as they unfolded.

More than 20 organisations are part of the Greater Bendigo Relief and Recovery Committee, Chaired by the Mayor. The Committee has worked together to address the needs of vulnerable groups, including socially isolated people, people with low digital literacy or with limited access to internet, Aboriginal communities, people with disabilities, older people living alone, people from CALD communities, including many on temporary visas not eligible for income support, and young people including tertiary students who have lost access to casual employment opportunities.

The impacts of COVID-19 in Greater Bendigo have been highly gendered (as is the case in Victoria and more broadly). More women are unemployed because of COVID-19 (especially given the local impacts in hospitality, tourism and retail where women form a high percentage of the workforce). Women have also shouldered a bigger burden of unpaid labour at home (including home schooling) and there are significant concerns about higher rates of family violence.

COVID-19 restrictions have had a huge impact on community groups and opportunities to participate in sporting clubs and cultural and religious activities. Reactivation of community groups is a major challenge and a critical dimension of long-term social recovery.

Recommendations

The City encourages the committee to consider the following recommendations:

- Reactivate the Regional Events Fund – the \$465M recovery and reform fund to reactivate events is critical to the Greater Bendigo tourism economy recovering. Within the fund, \$20M was allocated for regional events. The City is engaging in a number of discussions with event organisers and access to this fund would fast track securing these events and kickstart a local, events-led recovery in line with our pre-COVID-19 tourism calendar.
- Relax density limits – the City welcomes the recent announcement that indoor and outdoor entertainment, cultural and sporting venues can have up to 1,000 patrons per space. However, further easing is critical, particularly for hospitality venues and larger indoor stadiums, such as the Bendigo Stadium which is regional Victoria’s largest indoor stadium able to hold up to 4,000 people.
- Restrictions - it will be critical that should there be any further outbreaks in metropolitan Melbourne, there is a system in place that does not lockdown the rest of the state unnecessarily. That was a key challenge during the second lockdown last year, as regional areas recovered and transmission remained stable, keeping these economies under the same restrictions as Melbourne was inequitable.
- Improved DHHS communications – the Department needs to provide access to information for all event organisers that explains why some events are able to continue and others are not. In some instances, some events are being cancelled, yet a similar one in another area can go ahead (e.g. Grooven the Moo is cancelled in Bendigo, yet SummerSalt Music Festival on the Mornington Peninsula is approved). Transparency and consistency across the state is critical. All too often people see AFL football crowds and anecdotal reports of a lack of social distancing and cannot understand how an event of approximately 10,000 people cannot be supported. Event approvals also need to happen much quicker, so event organisers can have time to prepare their event, and they need to be connected to a support team within the department so they can seek timely advice.
- Volunteer support – due to the age of volunteers, activities they supported that have not returned, general uncertainty and volunteers discovering the ‘freedom’ of not volunteering, some clubs and industries will find it hard to reactivate. An initiative that builds the capacity of facilities to attract new and returning volunteers is essential, as is a state-wide campaign that targets the younger generations and reminds people of the value of volunteering and the all-important connection to community.



- Tourism vouchers – should the Victorian Government consider another round of travel incentives, it is important the initiative is equitable. E.g. if there are 40,000 vouchers, divide these evenly across the Victorian tourism regions. Tickets for each region could be released weekly as a way to give all regions a fair share.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on Greater Bendigo's regional economy. The tail of the recovery and its impact will be long and the full impact is yet to be realised, particularly as a range of support measures, including Job Keeper, come to an end.

Targeted Victorian Government support and funding, along with the further easing of restrictions is critical to supporting recovery and aiding regional Victoria's ability to bounce back.