

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Thursday, 14 May 2020

Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

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Mr Danny O'Brien

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WITNESS

Ms Liz Price, General Manager, Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism.

The CHAIR: We are joined by the Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism General Manager. Thank you for joining us. Welcome to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian Government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside of this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. I would ask photographers and camerapersons to follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the secretariat.

Thank you for joining us. We invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement. Please state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes. This will be followed by questions from the Committee Members relative to their representation here today.

Ms PRICE: Thanks, Chair. My name is Liz Price, I am the General Manager of Great Ocean Road Regional Tourism. I thought I would start by giving a little bit of context that tourism is pretty big business for the Great Ocean Road region. It represents \$1.8 billion in tourism consumption, about 7.4 per cent of gross regional product, and it employs about 18 per cent of the workforce, 9000 direct and 3000 indirect. But as previous speakers have said, it is actually an industry of micro and really small businesses, so we have about 1900 tourism businesses, of which only 1200 are employing businesses and 700 are not. I think, like one of the comments you heard before, this has really brought out, I suppose, the cracks in how some of these businesses are structured and those that are falling through the gaps and have not been eligible for things as we have gone through. The region is really dependent on tourism, so we have already seen some significant job losses in some of our key areas like Lorne, Anglesea and also the Otways.

So the business survival challenges I thought would be where I would kind of start and say that there has been a lot of confusion, I suppose, as the operating guidelines started and the restrictions started to come into place. There is a lot of confusion for operators about what it did mean for them and how they did reimagine their businesses or they did try to operate through that time. But there are enormous amounts of the sector that have not been able to operate at all. So as we look to start to ease those restrictions I think the number one thing is we really need to make sure we are very clear what those operational guidelines are and who they apply to.

Government support on the whole has been pretty positively received as a real help for survival. I suppose what the industry is saying to me is the panic is: what happens when it stops? We are going to be in the weakest part of our year. We are very seasonal—60 per cent of our accommodation is in the first four months of the year. We are going to come out of this in the worst possible time, when we really do struggle to get visitation. There are real concerns around the impact on their cost structures as businesses as to how they open and give the consumer confidence that they can do the social distancing and the hygiene that is required, because that is a big cost impost to them. And how do they get the resources to navigate and transition and, I suppose, rebuild their businesses to be competitive in a new world? I think Felicia talked about that it will be a very different world that we going to be coming out in.

For our region we really do see it is a very long road to recovery. There is often this thought, and I think one of the gentlemen asked the question before, about this cabin fever and that we are going to be desperate to get out, but for our region that is going to highlight one of our biggest challenges: that we have a lot of—and I am going to sound like a dirty capitalist—profitless volume that actually is not going to help the businesses get back on their feet. So the initial easing of restrictions, encouraging people to come back for a surf, come back for a hike, is fantastic for people's health and wellbeing and to get them out in the natural environment, but it is not going to deliver an economic return to the businesses in the region. That is probably our biggest challenge.

We really need to think about how we use this opportunity, which has exposed our weaknesses—our heavy reliance on summer, our heavy reliance on that daytrip visitor and especially international daytrippers. How do we really drive overnight visitation? Melbourne is our biggest market. By no stretch of imagination is international our biggest market; our biggest market is Melbourne and regional Victoria. But that market is going to be heavily competitive with all other interstate markets desperately trying to get that Melbourne market to them. As everyone tries to pivot or reimagine to target the domestic market, we are not competitive. We have been watching the media over the last three to five years. We have some significant challenges with the quality of our public infrastructure. We have significant challenges with the quality of our private product. Domestically we are not competitive, and so we really do run the risk that we are going to be challenged and that we are going to see our normal market drop off as well. This is, and I think Felicia talked to you about it, an economic crisis now, and tourism is a discretionary spend. A decision to go on a holiday, to go on a short break, is a discretionary spend if you have the money. With annual leave balances being reduced, with household income being hit, we are going to have less people that are going to be out and about travelling.

From an initial recovery perspective, I think we really are going to see this cluttered marketplace, so product is going to be what is king—but it also gives us a pathway out. As a region we have over \$2 billion worth of public and private investment in the pipeline. That will create jobs through construction but also long-term jobs, which will drive all-year-round visitation for our region. That year-round visitation will not just benefit the bigger businesses that are coming in; it will help the smaller businesses to survive. We have got small businesses that do not have the year-round visitation to grow and to put on additional staff because they cannot carry them through all winter. We see businesses that cannot get staff in a summer, so they can only open for one meal of the day, whereas if they could start to build to that next level of business, they would be able to be year-round businesses and be full-on employing.

We have some towns that are very, very dependent on international visitors and international daytrippers. In Apollo Bay an enormous amount of the businesses on that main street really rely on that big number of visitors coming through, but also places like Port Campbell, where 60 to 70 per cent of the accommodation is in international markets.

The CHAIR: I might just stop you there, thank you. Sorry—unusual rules of our Committee.

Ms PRICE: I always need that reminder.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thanks, Liz. Thanks so much for joining us here today, and you can carry on some of your points as we go through the questions, because I think where you were going with the different nature of where towns along the Great Ocean Road find themselves and their different exposures is a really important point. I think the overarching representation that you bring across a wide region is really important since your establishment in 2013. Can I say from the outset as well thank you for the work that you are doing to support people doing it tough. I know some of these chats are pretty hard for people who are struggling through as they try to find their way through this crisis. I just wanted to go just quickly to the point around those exposures. What is the breakdown? We heard from Visit Victoria this morning the breakdown of domestic and then international. What is the exposure across the board for the Great Ocean Road tourism to the international and domestic markets?

Ms PRICE: International overnight is only about 8 per cent of our visitation, but the daytrip visitation is large. We have about 785 000 international daytrippers. But 61 per cent is that Melbourne-regional Victoria market; the overnight market is our bread and butter.

Mr RICHARDSON: That is an interesting bit of evidence to then where we go in terms of the great point made by Mr Limbrick before about the sequencing of our recovery and easing of restrictions. It is a really important point as we stage the approach back in that support as well. Take us a little bit through then the vision that you have. Obviously your strategic reviews, plans and strategies that you put forward are now probably thrown on their head and there is going to be a lot more work to be done. But what do you see in the next weeks and months in terms of bringing that support back and bringing people back to the region?

Ms PRICE: I would say that our plans are not turned on their head. I think the great thing is that we have the strategic planning in place, and I see the opportunity now to accelerate and amplify the planning that is in place. We have an opportunity here to rebuild, and recovery is not just a marketing exercise. Recovery is looking at

product development, business innovation and how we help these businesses to restructure. So our initial approach has been trying to help them navigate through what is available and where they get the most accurate information, which is kind of a role regional tourism boards play in a crisis anyway to make sure that there is an opportunity, that they are hearing the official source of the truth and they are getting through to that core information that is going to help them then and there. We have now started to move into a phase of trying to get businesses to reconnect and start to rethink about what it is going to look like on the other side. What does that mean in terms of compliance? But what does that also mean for their business? We have been offering some free training and things to try and also be a bit of inspiration to start thinking a little bit differently but also to start to bring them back into the fold.

I think Brendan talked a little bit about the mental health issue. A lot of these businesses run in very isolated environments. They do not have the colleagues that we have necessarily to call on and for support and to throw ideas at. Someone said to me yesterday, 'You've probably haven't been very busy', and I laughed. I do not think my phone has ever rung so much. I think it is probably one of the exciting things about our industry—that they have seen they can reach out, they can have a conversation with somebody—but we have to resource this so that we can do that and that there are those resources there for them.

I think the next thing is really how we look at helping them to restructure and build different businesses for the future. The product problem in our region and really across regional Victoria has been a lack of private investment being facilitated, so we have not kept pace with some of that and so businesses have got a little bit lazy. There is an opportunity to help businesses to restructure, to rebuild and to be better at what they are doing so they offer a better product and they can get a better yield and they can charge a better price. We have got businesses that are still earning and creating yield that is the same as what they were getting 15 years ago, that have not evolved and have not been able to build a better business, so I think there is an opportunity that comes out of here as to how we help them to do that.

Mr RICHARDSON: So taking you to what businesses are telling you of the events of the bushfires early on, the impact that that has had, and then the flow-on now with the coronavirus pandemic, what are businesses operating along the Great Ocean Road telling you about these events and obviously their future viability? We heard earlier from the tourism council that some two-thirds of businesses are effectively in hibernation or not operating. What are you hearing from your stakeholders?

Ms PRICE: I think there is a bit of a concern you are going to see two hits to the economy or these businesses. You are going to see what is happening now, and there will be some businesses that will not get through this initial period. Felicia did talk about how our big plan is to try to get as many as possible over the bridge to the other side to survive. I think in our region and other regions where we have got such strong seasonality you are going to also see a second hit. If we do not get a reasonable summer, you are going to see another range of businesses go to the wall next winter or not get through next winter.

So I think that probably the challenge now is to start to look at how we support them through that period of time, especially those that have taken loans to try and get staff through or they are deferring payments. Eventually that catches up with you if you do not have the money. We have so many businesses that really do rely on making their money in those first six to 12 weeks of summer; that is going to get them through the whole of winter. So without that we are going to have businesses that are going to be standing a long way behind the start line this year.

I do think we have got to start to also think about how we tackle the marketing and the planning so that we are not all cannibalising each other, and I think that is where there is a bit of a challenge. The initial step is around marketing. The sequencing—we are going to see first and foremost the return of intrastate visitors. That also presents another challenge for places like us. There has been some real community unrest that this is a disease—a pandemic—that was caused by visitors coming in, so if we open the floodgates and visitors come back, are we bringing back that problem and bringing that problem into small communities that do not have the health services? We have to earn a social licence to enable us to get people to come back into our region and to be able to go out and market. Our approach has been that we will look at and really focus first and foremost on visiting friends and relatives. One, we have missed them, but, two, there is going to be a comfort in the community that that is an audience we want to have back and that we want to come back straightaway—the challenge being that visiting friends and relatives might not necessarily stay in commercial accommodation, so how then do you start to build back commercial accommodation?

Both the previous speakers have talked about the importance of events. Events really do give the Great Ocean Road region that winter trade. Whether it is the May race carnival in Warrnambool, whether it is the Great Ocean Road Running Festival that helps Apollo Bay, those events are significant events for accommodation and for businesses, not just in the events but often in the lead-up and in the profile those events create for future visitors. So we have also lost all of that component and have to really look at how we build back.

The regional tourism review, again, Felicia talked about it. We too made a significant submission to the regional tourism review to say, 'We have the framework; we just need to put some meat around it. We need to invest in it'. We have the framework to be very competitive and to really take the lead nationally as a domestic and an international tourism destination, not just as the Great Ocean Road but as the whole of Victoria. But we need that investment.

Mr RICHARDSON: How do you unpack that? What are the things that you are looking for in terms of that review? In the coronavirus pandemic and now leading into an economic recovery plan, what are the things that you are looking to unpack and see to unify all regional areas into securing some of those benefits and return to trade?

Ms PRICE: I think the first one has to be around facilitating private-sector investment and really starting to help the planning process so it is not such—I look at the Great Ocean Road region; we have been talking about governance reform for more than five years. We have got to make sure we have got that investment, we accelerate things and we give it the funds to make it successful. We have got to find a way to help planning so we can get some of these new private-sector investments happening in the region so we can address that seasonality. If we address the seasonality for the region, we actually help the small businesses that can now trade 365 days of the year and not be trying to rely on a 12-week season. I think those are the things that out of this—and the regional tourism review really talked about how important it is that Victoria needs to invest in product and the public-sector product. The maintenance of the Great Ocean Road—it has been fantastic to have \$153 million over the last seven, I think, years, but that is only the start of it. We need almost \$20 million a year to make sure it is that internationally recognised icon.

Our number one icon, the Twelve Apostles—I do not know if any of you have visited recently—is an embarrassment. The visitors service centre—thank God the natural attraction is spectacular, because the visitor experience is not. We do not want to go and build back to that; we need to build back better. There is money on the table through the city deal. We have got to accelerate to make that happen so that when we are shouting from the rooftops encouraging people to come back, we can offer them a quality visitor experience. I am citing the example of the Great Ocean Road because that is what I know and love, but all over the state there are private-sector opportunities and public-sector opportunities that could make us a much more competitive state.

Mr RICHARDSON: This is a really good point. I have got family on my wife's side through the UK, and every one of them that comes and visits, as they are coming in on the plane, with the Visit Victoria branding as well—it is iconic, and that is one of the first things you go and see. It is in Mr Riordan's electorate as well.

Mr RIORDAN: A fine electorate.

Ms PRICE: And probably just one really big challenge we do have is that we have to get the balance right between the environment and the economics of it, because we need the economics to maintain the environment and maintain the experience. We absolutely sell the natural attractions, so that has to be paramount, but if we do not get the economics right and we are inviting everyone back into our national parks, we are inviting everyone back on our beaches, how do we maintain them? And I think that is the big thing. From a community point of view, we have got communities that are probably thinking this is the best thing that has happened in terms of the fact that we have not got visitors for a while because they are seeing it as a chance to recover. I think we have got to be building back a solution that actually supports our communities. They are seeing that their core infrastructure has been eroded and not invested in. So now it is at a point of, 'I'm just angry', but if we can show them that we can get a system in place where we can invest in that infrastructure so they have a better quality of life, they have a better experience, they will be back to embracing visitors—maybe not all of them.

Mr RICHARDSON: And that is a really important point about the balance between that local experience and then also what underpins the vibrancy of these areas and their businesses as well. I think it is a really good point you make.

Ms PRICE: In the hospitality sector we have seen so many of them pivot to do delivery and takeaway. If you have got a population of 670 people, it is actually pretty difficult to pivot and to survive on takeaway.

I think you asked the question about cafes and restaurants starting to reopen. I have operators with very mixed feelings about that. Some say, 'Great, we need it desperately'. Some say, 'No. The visitors aren't coming back. I can't afford to open. I can't afford to meet the requirements. All this pressure on me from my staff to bring everybody back when I'm not going to be able to bring everyone back necessarily'. So there is that really double-edged sword that for a lot of these businesses—some of the really small ones that might have been able to find a little bit of a niche in takeaway and delivery—there are the overheads to come back to comply at full operation. So there is not a simple process here. I think that is Felicia's point: that there is not this one big magic bullet, that we really need to be working through these really complex individual things that different businesses are facing.

Mr RICHARDSON: We might unpack a bit of the business support. Can I take you to the Business Support Fund and then the commercial tenancy relief scheme. It might also cross over with some of your experience with JobKeeper and JobSeeker. Can you take us through what businesses are telling you? We heard yesterday from the Australian Industry Group, I think, in their evidence—or VCCI—that there was a lower take-up than they expected. What has been the experience from your stakeholders with the Business Support Fund and then also the experience with JobKeeper and JobSeeker?

Ms PRICE: I suppose the Business Support Fund was well received initially. There has been some confusion around who was eligible, and quite a few were not eligible—their ANZSIC codes and various things came back. That has put a lot of people into panic: 'What does this mean? Does this mean I'm not going to be now eligible for JobKeeper? I was kind of thinking that was going to tide me over—to get JobKeeper'. So I think that has been a little bit of the challenge.

With JobKeeper of course the biggest challenge has been, 'How do I pay staff? I've closed my business. How do I have the cash to pay people? All well and good to say to go out and get a loan, but I'm going into debt. I'm already in debt. I don't know what the window's like'. This is probably the most unique challenge we have ever had to face—that we do not know what that endgame is and how long this is going to go.

Economic recovery analysis that we have looked at: we could be 22–23 at best before we start to see the same levels of economy that we have had; at worst 24–25. So for a business starting to plan now and think, 'What does that look like for me? Is this enough support on the table?', I think it has been a bit about survival. But it is not about, 'How do I then reposition myself and get ready to get going again?'. I think that is where we are going to see it. I have got businesses on a daily basis, like Hire a Kombi, saying, 'Do I just close for the whole of winter, bite the bullet, go and try and find a job and then think about coming back in summer to try again? What momentum do I lose?'

For those that are international programs, they cannot afford to do that. We cannot afford to lose that momentum. They might not be international coming through, but we have got to be there because it is a long decision time. So you have still got to have your product in that market. If you get out of that market, it is three to five years to build up the relationships again and get back into the program.

Mr RICHARDSON: I think your point, Liz, around I guess coming out of this and the easing of restrictions as well is really important for where JobKeeper sits at the moment and the conversations about changes to that. What are your thoughts on its time frame? At the moment it is legislated, I think, up to September, but there are suggestions that that might change sooner. What is your view on JobKeeper continuing into the future?

Ms PRICE: I think the challenge for our industry is that any time before November–December you are coming out in a weak time and we are going to really struggle to get visitation anyway. I think you will still see a number of businesses that will not survive through that, especially if it is cut back sooner.

Mr RICHARDSON: In the last minute that I have got, Liz, I guess in the vision going forward—so in the weeks and months ahead—what are the things that you and your team are doing, I guess, to set the agenda with government and that engagement going forward? What are the things that you are putting forward to both the state and federal—and local councils? There are a number of local councils that you interact with as well. Could you take us through a bit of the things you are working on at the moment?

Ms PRICE: Yes. We have a regional tourism recovery plan with sort of four phases to it. The first part is really around trying to build with the businesses and work on their resilience and restructuring and help them build their professionalism. We have noticed through this whole phase how our digital footprint is significantly lacking. We used to have some real challenges in our region around digital capability but also around connectivity, but we see there is a real pathway to help operators start to own their own customer base and really build their digital footprint, so that is a key focus. From a marketing perspective, it is starting at that visiting-friends-and-relatives market and working with each of our communities to start to build back and start to welcome people back into our economy. From an infrastructure point of view, we see this as the time to invest in the *Great Ocean Road Action Plan* to fund some of that public and private sector investment—let us build back our attractions better. Let us get the private sector in there and supporting us so that we have a better product in the future.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you for appearing. Look, you have already touched on it, but I am keen to find out more. We have heard evidence that nature-based tourism is going to be the place to go; that is what the market is looking for. How are you addressing that and how are you planning on taking advantage of that?

Ms PRICE: Anyone in regional tourism would say, ‘I’ve got the best nature-based product in the state’, whether it be the volcanic plains, the spectacular rainforests or the ocean. We see one of the opportunities as starting to look at how we package that with the commercial product. So we are trying to work with operators now, especially those that have been into the international arena that are looking to find another way forward. How do they focus on packaging that up with their offer? Traditionally the national parks and all of that are all free, so often those people do not necessarily touch any businesses, but how can we do things? We have got some small businesses looking at even if they can drop off and pick up, businesses looking to see how they could work in more of a guided tour or work with some of the smaller tour operators. We have some fabulous products like kayaking out to the seals at Marengo or with platypus on Lake Elizabeth. How do we build that into more of the accommodation product so that we have got a better offer? So I think for us it is much more taking that nature-based product and having a much more retail approach to how we sell it and how we package it up with our operators.

Mr HIBBINS: I am just curious. In terms of the bushfires has there been any impact on the quality of the national parks and any need for restoration to ensure that you have got the best, as I am sure you would say, nature-based offerings—

Ms PRICE: So we had fires up in the Budj Bim landscape, and if it is ever a good thing, they uncovered even more spectacular landscape up there that the traditional owners have gone out and seen. I think that is going to be a significant investment happening up there, so that will be quite great. The Budj Bim National Park needed some additional work and I think some of the walking tracks still remain closed, but on the whole most of our parks were not that affected—not where the people go. It is interesting because the bushfire season really started back in August with New South Wales, and we experienced some significant cancellations quite early with people really starting to get concerned about going into places where bushfire is such a significant risk. Then the cancellation of the Falls Festival refocused people’s attention. They thought, ‘Oh right, that’s not a destination to necessarily go to in summer’. So we are seeing some of these businesses really think about—and even the events—how they start to look beyond that period of time of operating, because it just puts so much risk into their business, what happens.

Mr HIBBINS: Fair enough. Finally, I saw you mentioned more pivoting to the local, to the intrastate and the interstate visitation as opposed to international visitors.

Ms PRICE: Regional Victoria has not been taken interstate for probably 20 years. I have been in the industry way too long—I do not want to give away my age too much, but about 20 years. I do think there is an opportunity to start to look at what is the regional Victoria offer for interstate. There are a lot of markets. Interstate for us is only about 12 per cent, so we see there may be an opportunity to really start to grow that. I think Felicia talked to how we see that with petrol prices down and with airfares potentially being more expensive more people are potentially getting in the car. So we see that South Australian market and some of that New South Wales market being a real opportunity, and with TT-Line coming into Geelong, even opening up Tasmania. So we do see that there are a lot of those interstate markets where if we packaged our products differently—we do not normally as a regional tourism board have the budget to go interstate—there may be an opportunity to look at what is the interstate offer for regional Victoria.

Mr RIORDAN: Welcome, Liz. It is great to have the whole focus of a witness on my electorate; it is brilliant. You talked about the decline in international visitors and the importance of that to the Great Ocean Road economy. We know they cannot fix that tomorrow. We have heard from other witnesses it is the drive-and-stay-overnight domestic industry. Could you just elaborate a little bit on the crisis that has existed now for quite some time in the Great Ocean Road region? I think, off the top of my head, there are six or seven accommodation projects that have sat spinning their wheels now for certainly the length of time I have been in this job. What could be done to accelerate those or actually get some accommodation available on the ground? Also, to marry that with the other great risk, the accommodation growth in recent years has been through Airbnb and people renting, and I am hearing from real estate agents and others that many businesses have taken over leases for Airbnb. Of course that has all collapsed now, they have handed back the keys, so we are actually going to see less accommodation available for domestic visitors. Could you just elaborate on that?

Ms PRICE: So we have an accommodation shortage of, depending on which study you look at, somewhere between 2500 and 4500 rooms. And that is across all things, not just hotels—that is resorts, caravan parks, the full gamut. We have seen abundances of over 3500 Airbnb properties across the region, and that was growing constantly, and that has been picking up the overdemand. We have had a supply problem, and we have had these six or seven projects on the cards for quite a long time. We have got to really look at our planning processes and how we can start to accelerate these plans through. There is often a concern that these big developments will have a negative impact on the smaller developments, and although we see that sometimes initially, big developments actually have to market a destination and because we have got all microbusinesses we do not have any of those businesses actively marketing their business. So we see with that product that Melbourne is the one that is benefiting from our region not having that product. There were over 885 000 visitors in 2017, interstate and international, who stayed in Melbourne because we do not have the quality of accommodation offering that they are looking for. We do have some luxury accommodation but it is all fully self-contained. We do not have that full service-type accommodation they are looking for. We do not have branded accommodation that gives internationals reassurance and interstate reassurance about the quality of what they are going to experience. And then we do not necessarily have the food services that then can support them to come all year round. That is what those bigger establishments would do—start to drive some of that real accommodation, bigger accommodation, drive visitation all year round alongside the attractions.

Mr RIORDAN: Could you also comment on another issue you will be familiar with? We have heard today that camping and caravanning is set to boom, hopefully, as people reimagine their holiday options.

Ms PRICE: As long as it is in commercial parks.

Mr RIORDAN: In our region you will be aware that while the Government has been very good in providing lease holidays for many operators on Crown leases, in the caravan park industry in our region not one operator has a lease longer than 12 months, and most of them are down to almost monthly leases, which means their capacity to innovate and invest quickly and in the short term to try and drive business I am sure is very hampered. Could you comment on that?

Ms PRICE: Yes. We have significant Crown parks along the coast—Marengo, Forrest—

Mr RIORDAN: Peterborough.

Ms PRICE: Peterborough—that have had private companies that were looking to invest in those, but now without the surety of a long-term lease they are not prepared to do that investment. Felicia talked about caravan and camping parks have really changed, what the shape of them is, and unfortunately those parks have not necessarily kept pace with what the offer is elsewhere. They have amazing locations but do not necessarily have the facilities. It is interesting, because in this time normally most of our parks, most of our businesses, would actually be renovating, refurbishing and doing maintenance. None of that work is happening—one, because they do not have surety about their leases, but also we do not know how long this is going to be and they do not have the resources or the confidence to invest in a business that they do not know is going to be around.

Mr RIORDAN: In your statistics, just to clarify them, I think you said there were roughly 1900 tour businesses in the region, 1200 have employees. That leaves around 700 what we would call microbusinesses, and I have raised this with a couple of witnesses. I am getting huge feedback from those 700 businesses that

because they do not employ people, they often take drawings and are small businesses, and many of them will have quite expensive set-ups, whether it is multiple cottages or whatever. Essentially the only support they are getting at the moment is one JobSeeker payment. And as you also pointed out, most of those businesses that are isolated at Johanna or other key spots, beautiful spots, have no other ways of generating an income with their investment. So how important are those 700 small businesses to the regional economy? Also, what do you see as their outlook without some extra support and help?

Ms PRICE: That is probably the biggest at-risk category. They have had the least amount of support in terms of financial support but they are also at risk because they are the unique ones, I suppose, in the region. They are often the unique product that is quite an amazing product that is going to encourage people to keep coming back into the region. But they are very limited. So some of the things we are trying to do with them is get them to connect to other businesses and get them to connect in with us. We have made our base program. Normally we were a fee for service and we charged people; we have made that free for any business to come on board over the next three months. Because that really is about trying to get those businesses all connected into a support mechanism so they have at least got somewhere they can go. They can make sure they have got informed information and they can have a vehicle to start to get out to market—to new markets that they have not had access to before.

Mr RIORDAN: The Great Ocean Road—you talked about 60 per cent of the income in four months. The region has for quite some time now developed events, and they will often have great state and federal support promoting them, whether it is the art biennale in Lorne or the marathon or whatever those events are. Have you got some suggestions? When we are looking for perhaps a two-year period where big events may not be possible, have you got ideas on how for those types of things the emphasis will not be lost?

Ms PRICE: We asked in the regional tourism review to have a really good look at the Regional Events Fund and look at actually investing further in the Regional Events Fund, because regional events are a great way to drag somebody out to a region where they might not have wanted to come to before and really start to refocus and see a new destination. An enormous amount of the events, though, are community-based events or community-run with volunteers. Some of those will never come back. So we are going to see through this period of time that we are actually going to lose quite a lot of events. So I do think we have got to start to be thinking about: how do we build up those events? Because those events are really important—not just to attract visitors but also for community pride and community connectedness. You see things like Winter Weekends in Port Fairy, where it is all of the businesses getting together to try and create a new reason to come because they know visitation is so slow. Most of the businesses invest their own money. In all of this there are a lot of very unhappy calls and very sad calls, and you really feel at a bit of a loss that there is nothing you can say or do to help someone. The other side is the innovation that you do see and the inspiration—someone like the Great Ocean Road resort in Anglesea, who is pulling all of them together to run a campaign that he is funding himself to try and make sure that they are connecting the businesses up. I think that is the thing that I would say: we have got to think through, with events, with these small businesses how do we find mechanisms to keep them connected so they are not islands?

Mr RIORDAN: And finally, with a minute to go, the great icon, being the Twelve Apostles, that is often the magnet that draws people through the region, you highlighted it has been a very disappointing attraction for quite some time. It is largely dominated by international visitors on any given day, and they are not going to be there, so the place will be much emptier. This obviously presents a unique opportunity to get some work done and improvements down there. What would be your top two, three or four things that the Government could streamline at this time?

Ms PRICE: It has funding under the city plan to start implementing, and it is actually some of the basic infrastructure. But I think we have really got to look at addressing: what is the visitor experience there? What is the car park? What is the entry? So that we can start to curate the experience and make it a better experience for the consumer. Yes, there are some grand plans, and it would be great to have a world-class attraction with a fantastic facility, but some of those basic things need to be accelerated, and they are going to create jobs. So you can start looking at the road construction and start looking at the car parks. I think because the attraction is so heavily visited, we have got to think that those solutions we put in place to get to the long-term solution—the short-term solutions to get to the long term—need to be addressing the long term now so that we do not create something then have to fix it. We have got to invest smartly and make sure we are investing for the long term. I think the key to that side is really looking at what is that public-private sector partnership.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We appreciate you coming here, and we, as we said to the previous witness, also very much appreciate the work you are doing in difficult circumstances in the community in which you work. The Committee will follow up on any of the questions taken on notice in writing and require responses within five days of the request. So thank you for coming along today. We will also now take a 15-minute short break and declare the hearing adjourned before consideration of the next witness. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.