



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL  
TERRITORY**

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

(Reference: [COVID-19 pandemic response](#))

**Members:**

**MR A COE (Chair)**  
**MS T CHEYNE (Deputy Chair)**  
**MRS V DUNNE**  
**MS C LE COUTEUR**  
**MR M PETTERSSON**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**FRIDAY, 8 MAY 2020**

**Secretary to the committee:**  
**Mr H Finlay (Ph: 620 50129)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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## **Privilege statement**

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Witnesses must tell the truth: giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter, and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly.

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 10.10 am.**

**GRIFFITHS, MR RICHARD OAM**, Coordinator, Safe Shelter ACT

**THE CHAIR:** Good morning everyone, and welcome to this public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Mr Richard Griffiths from Safe Shelter for joining us today. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement.

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes, I do understand the privilege statement.

**THE CHAIR:** Good; thank you. I would also like to remind you that the proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and, as you are aware, we are being webstreamed and broadcast live. Before we ask questions, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to give?

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes, thank you. Safe Shelter, as most of the committee will be aware, is an entirely voluntary organisation operating within three church halls in the inner city area so that we have one church hall open every night in winter only. We were preparing to open before COVID-19 became a major problem. As it developed, in February, we were trying to adjust how we would operate, but it was quite clear by early March that our model could not operate safely with COVID-19 and, therefore, on 23 March we had to announce that we would not be opening on the planned opening date of 26 April.

I was therefore very pleased that we were invited to join the ACT government's COVID-19 working group for rough sleepers. That is the title of the working group, which suggests an emphasis on COVID-19. However, thinking about it, it became quite clear to me that COVID-19 as a disease was going to lead not so much to direct consequences for rough sleepers but to definite economic issues, which would in turn create homelessness via unemployment. The economic issues, as you know, led to unemployment, which led to the big lines around Centrelink and to homelessness as a consequence of all of that.

The response to homelessness needs to be modified to meet the medical and health concerns about COVID-19, one of which is the closure of Safe Shelter. All the other places that dealt with the homeless had to be prepared for an increased number of homeless but were hamstrung somewhat by the necessity to deal with the medical concerns of COVID-19. So that is the background of where we started.

How long I have got, chair?

**THE CHAIR:** We have 20 minutes from when we started, so we have a bit over 15 minutes left.

**Mr Griffiths:** Well, perhaps if the committee would like to ask me questions, I will try to get in any other points.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay; that would be good. Have you seen any new clients or are you aware of any new potential clients since the COVID crisis started or is it just the existing clients in a more precarious situation?

**Mr Griffiths:** As far as Safe Shelter is concerned, I get a lot of phone calls from people who are homeless, or people who find people who are homeless and ask, “What am I supposed to do?” This has continued during the current crisis. Of course, we cannot say, “Send any men to Safe Shelter tonight,” because we are not open, but I have been getting phone calls.

This was raised in the working group. I said that I thought perhaps OneLink, which is the ACT government’s referral service, should be opening for longer because there were people calling me and I could not help them at all. In previous winters the police or the hospitals would call to check where we were open and such like, if they did not know, and we could deal with them. But now we cannot, and all I can say when I get a phone call is, “You’ll need to contact OneLink tomorrow morning, when they’re open, to see if they can help you.”

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr Griffiths:** We have had calls at the weekends and things like that. That has all been passed on to the chair of the working group.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thank you for appearing, Mr Griffiths. There has been quite a bit of commentary in the media right around Australia about whether rough sleepers should be housed in hotels. I understand that in WA they went ahead with this but have recently abandoned it. There has been a bit of commentary about why it was abandoned. I am just curious about your views on that.

**Mr Griffiths:** Early on, the working group was invited to make suggestions about accommodation. It turned out that Safe Shelter was the only group that wrote a paper which addressed all the options. One of the things we looked at was hotels and motels. The point about those options is that they are scalable—in other words, if the demand goes up, you can just get more hotel rooms or motel rooms. Of the two, we suggested that motels were the easiest to deal with because they are generally smaller, they are not multistorey, they do not have people walking down shared corridors and they do not have people using lifts and such like. And the motel rooms, particularly the older ones, are generally set up for people to cook for themselves and look after themselves.

So we suggested that motels would be the option to go with. We figured that the number of homeless on the streets when this whole thing started—by the time you count all the women sleeping in cars and things like that—was probably around 100. We knew we had somewhere between 40 and 50 men on the streets and we figured that there were a whole lot of women that we did not know about because they were sleeping in cars. So you would probably want to have two motels—one for women and one for men. You could easily improve them—you know, put security on those sorts of places—because motels, in general, have reasonable security around the grounds. That was our option. I know OneLink has been using its money to put people into hotels, but I think it has had problems with that, just as Western Australia has.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Mr Griffiths, I think I am going to be telling you news. Last night, CDNet, at 5.38, told us that Argyle is opening a winter lodge on 11 May.

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Are you aware of this?

**Mr Griffiths:** Yes, we got a copy of that too.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Great. I was going to ask you, what is your reaction to that? How does it compare to what you were doing? Is it an adequate replacement?

**Mr Griffiths:** Well, it is a different replacement. They carefully do not call it a shelter, because no-one is allowed to use the term “shelter” in the ACT system. They are calling it a lodge, so it is called the winter lodge. Immediately that raises questions: is it only for winter and is it going to close down even if COVID-19 continues? The big thing is that we consider it to be very bureaucratic. People have to be referred to it—presumably that is going to be done by OneLink—and referrals have to be in by 5 o’clock, and not at the weekends. It would appear that no food is to be provided, so presumably the men are supposed to go to a place like the Red Cross roadhouse for dinner and then trudge up to Argyle Housing in the Ainslie Village. And in the morning they would presumably go to the Early Morning Centre for breakfast. That is my reading, from what we have seen.

I am sure they will modify some of the procedures as they go along, but there is a two-page form that has to be filled in for referrals. This is something that a lot of the men—not so much the smarter homeless men who came to Safe Shelter but some of the ones that get a bit bolshie—may have some difficulty with. But that is another issue. In general, Safe Shelter is delighted that something is coming up that looks as if it is an alternative. We think that it is, though, geared at the market of 2019; it is not looking at the number of homeless people who we think are probably going to come on the streets over the next few months in the ACT.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Yes. Do you think the lack of capacity is the major problem with it?

**Mr Griffiths:** Well, it has only 18 places, as far as I understand.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Yes.

**Mr Griffiths:** As the committee is probably aware, Safe Shelter could cope with 10, although we were full on about 30 or 40 nights last year and had to turn people away. So I think that 18 will be filled almost immediately.

**MRS DUNNE:** Thank you very much, Mr Griffiths, for your attendance today. Could I go to the number of homeless and whether Safe Shelter, as a homelessness provider, is seeing a different pattern of people this year? You said in answer to Ms Le Couteur’s question that the Argyle model was a model for last year. Can you tell us what differences in patterns of presentation you are seeing this year?

**Mr Griffiths:** Well, Safe Shelter is not open, has not opened this year.

**MRS DUNNE:** Yes, I know.

**Mr Griffiths:** The difference in pattern, as we suggested in our paper to the working group, would be the use of hotels or motels—preferably motels—to deal with any increase in the number of homeless. The point is that at this stage we do not know how many additional homeless there are on the streets right now. This data is collected by OneLink, but it is certainly not shared. The last OneLink data that you can get publicly is for the September quarter last year, which is not much use in terms of assessing what the increasing demand is going to be. So we are waiting for reality to intrude on the current plans.

**MRS DUNNE:** Mr Griffiths, you have twice mentioned the paper that you have prepared for the working group. Would it be appropriate to share that paper with the committee?

**Mr Griffiths:** I would have to check with the chair of the working group, I am afraid, because—

**MRS DUNNE:** I understand, yes, but if it is possible, I think it might be instructive for the committee.

**Mr Griffiths:** Right; I will check with the working group chair.

**MRS DUNNE:** Great. Thank you.

**MR PETERSSON:** Mr Griffiths, do you have any concerns about what would happen if a homeless person were to contract COVID-19 in the ACT, and what pathways are available for them in responding to that?

**Mr Griffiths:** We were concerned about this. We raised our concerns at the beginning with this working group. The Chief Health Officer of the ACT has put out a paper on what is to be done. Initially, when Safe Shelter were looking at whether we could open, we said, “What would happen if someone with COVID-19 walked through the doors or if somebody who came in and slept on one of our church hall floors started to cough and sneeze during the night? Should we call an ambulance?”

In fact, the paper that has been produced now says that if anyone comes in contact with a homeless person who is exhibiting symptoms, they should be encouraged to get themselves tested, but, if necessary, an ambulance should be called. I think that this is a question better asked of Vinnies’ Street to Home. That organisation has people who go out onto the streets to track of some of the people that they are managing, but they also see other people, under bridges and such like. They are the ones who are most likely to find these people. But if the public finds anybody, they really need to call an ambulance if they think someone’s got COVID-19.

**THE CHAIR:** This might have to be the final question, unfortunately. Mr Griffiths, what more could the ACT government do to support Safe Shelter and, more generally, people who are homeless in the territory?

**Mr Griffiths:** The big thing for the ACT government is to realise that, effectively this likely increase in homelessness due to the economic consequences of COVID-19 is a get out of jail free card, because all the previous constraints on the responses to homelessness can be forgotten and forgiven. There are going to be more people on the streets. It is not the fault of anybody, but there have to be some actions taken to get them off the streets. Right now, we have things happening—for example, there was a report from two weeks ago that someone was fined \$85 for sitting on a park bench in the city. Homeless people have to sit down at some time; he was probably stropky and refused to move on. Nevertheless, these are the sorts of things that are affecting the homeless.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Griffiths. We very much appreciate you coming online with us today. As Mrs Dunne said, please pass on any information that you think might be useful for the committee to be aware of. This is a committee that is going to be operational for at least a few more months, and this issue is not going away, so please keep us posted and let us know if there is anything that we as a committee can do to advocate for the best possible outcome for the territory.

A copy of a transcript of this hearing will be sent to you in the coming weeks. Please review that and let us know if there are any changes. Again, thank you very much, Mr Griffiths.

**Mr Griffiths:** Thank you, chair.

**WIGGINS, MS NICOLE**, Director, Early Morning Centre

**THE CHAIR:** Good morning, Ms Wiggins, and welcome to this select committee hearing. It is good to have you here.

**Ms Wiggins:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I understand you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you have received it and that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

**Ms Wiggins:** Yes, I received it and I read and understand them. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Great. Thank you. We are being recorded for Hansard and we are being webstreamed live, as you know. Before we ask questions, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to make?

**Ms Wiggins:** Sure, okay. Do you want me to update you on what we are doing here at the Early Morning Centre at the moment?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes. We only have 20 minutes, so if you are able to give a two or three-minute rundown, that would be great.

**Ms Wiggins:** Okay. Before the national shutdown was announced, we became very concerned around hygiene in the centre. It is very difficult to get hygiene messages across and to get people to adhere to them. So we decided to move to takeaway, and it just happened to coincide with that announcement. We are providing takeaway breakfasts. We have a table set up at the front to act as a sort of physical barrier. We are providing a bit of a limited menu, a changed menu, due to the fact that I cannot have as big a volunteer team in in the centre so that we can adhere to social distancing.

The centre is open for breakfast and we are open during the day, but not for general entry. We are letting people in one at a time to use essential services such as the shower or to use the phone and to access the lockers. Most of our programs, such as art and craft, choir and cooking lessons, are not happening at the moment, but our medical service is running. We are still holding meetings with clients who need help with finding housing, and we are making the centre available also to the CatholicCare team and the Street to Home team to meet with people who need housing. So, yes, I suppose that is a quick rundown of what we are doing at the moment. We are not open for general entry but we are open for essential services.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you for all that you continue to do for Canberra. The first question is to Ms Cheyne.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thank you, Ms Wiggins, for appearing today. Are you aware of any issues with rough sleepers not feeling comfortable about getting tested for COVID-19 because they do not necessarily have accommodation in which they could then self-isolate?

**Ms Wiggins:** I am not aware of people being hesitant to access testing on that basis. I suppose it is more on the basis of not having information about where to access testing or really not understanding the virus and the impacts—you know, how serious it can be. That was one of the reasons we closed the centre—decided to go to takeaway—before the announcement, because people just did not understand the virus, were not taking it seriously and did not understand hygiene messages. So they were not accessing testing for that reason.

**MS CHEYNE:** What could we be doing better across the territory to make sure that the information and the seriousness of the virus is being communicated?

**Ms Wiggins:** We now have some sorts of low-literacy resources that we can provide to people to educate them on the virus. But I am not aware of access to testing in the city.

**MRS DUNNE:** One of the fairly standard questions I have been asking is in relation to the client base. Are you seeing a different client base this year than you would normally see in the centre, Ms Wiggins?

**Ms Wiggins:** Not a significant number but, yes, when the lockdown was first announced we saw a number of people who had been evicted from national parks, where they were camping. A number of the homeless population, like car sleepers, transfer interstate—they move interstate with the weather—and there were people who felt they were stuck in Canberra because of border closures. So we saw a change, seeing those people.

Also, a number of people who came did have accommodation—private accommodation. They were concerned for their future and wanted information around what options there were for lower cost accommodation and how to apply for ACT housing. So, yes, they were people that we would not usually see—people with concerns around their future, their future jobs and their future ability to pay private rent.

**MRS DUNNE:** So, essentially, were you seeing an uptick in the numbers? If you are saying that there were groups of people that you do not normally see who you are suddenly seeing, did you see an uptick in numbers and has that uptick persisted?

**Ms Wiggins:** Yes, we did initially see an uptick in numbers but, no, that has not persisted. It is a strange phenomenon. People turn up; they need help immediately. A large percentage of those people just disappear within a few days. We do not know what happens to them. They either find accommodation somewhere else or they move somewhere else.

It is a phenomenon that Safe Shelter also sees. They see people for four or five days and then they move on and they just never come back. So that initial rise in numbers, in new faces, has not continued over the last couple of weeks. Our numbers have actually dropped. A lot of regulars who do have accommodation are not accessing the service at the moment, because many of them are in the older age group or have complex health conditions. So we have actually seen a drop, overall, in numbers.

**MRS DUNNE:** So where would those people be?

**Ms Wiggins:** Many of our guests are either in private accommodation or in public housing. A lot of people access the Earlier Morning Centre more for the sense of community and belonging and to participate in activities such as cooking class or reading the paper, doing puzzles or using the computers. They would be staying in their homes. There is only a certain smallish percentage of people who are rough sleepers. It has been really great; a number of those have been housed recently with the new programs. Others are couch surfers. I do not know where they have gone. Some of those people were told that they needed to leave that accommodation; people were concerned around overcrowding. So they moved out to the suburbs, but they are staying at home somewhere or staying at somebody's home somewhere.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** You said that the centre is now generally closed, but I am aware that one of the services the centre provided was internet access. These days internet access is sort of essential for virtually all information. What are your clients doing to get access to the internet that they would have otherwise had via you, or has this just totally gone?

**Ms Wiggins:** Yes, it is pretty much totally gone. The area where we have our computers is really a small area. We are not able to provide social distancing in that area. We have allowed a few people occasionally to use the computer to access Centrelink, but apart from that we look up doctors or numbers online. If it is something that they urgently need to look up online we will do that for them. With us closing internet access and libraries being closed people are not getting internet access.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Yes. So, as far as you are aware, there is not any alternative for the people who do not have their own internet access?

**Ms Wiggins:** There is no alternative, no. We have said that we are open for essential services. So if people need a shower, need to access medical help or need to access Centrelink we will assist them to do that, but as far as them being able to come in and use the computers, that just is not possible at the moment. We just cannot ensure the social distancing except for one-off occasions, when we will set up a special area.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Okay. Do you have sufficient quantities of PPE, or have you come to the conclusion that you do not really need it? How are you doing from that point of view?

**Ms Wiggins:** We were very short. We are not using PPE apart from hand sanitiser and wipes. We did initially have a shortage, but we now have adequate supplies and have ordered more. But as far as wearing PPE, such as masks et cetera, there was no recommendation for us to do that—I have been regularly checking the health alerts—so we did not go that way.

**MR PETTERSSON:** You mentioned previously that you are now limited in the number of volunteers that you can have in the centre. Are you also simultaneously seeing a reduction in the number of volunteers that are available to help?

**Ms Wiggins:** Yes, absolutely. A number of our volunteers are retirees and in a certain

age group. I sent out an email urging volunteers who were in a certain age group or with health conditions to suspend their volunteering. It is really important that we look after that group of people. They are extremely important to us here. Probably about half of our volunteers have suspended volunteering at the moment because they are either in that age group or they are caring for somebody who is in a high-risk group.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Do you have enough support? Do you have enough volunteers to maintain the operations at the level you are currently operating at?

**Ms Wiggins:** I have enough volunteers to maintain levels at the moment. We have a modified breakfast menu. Usually we have five people in the kitchen to prepare breakfast but we have modified our breakfast menu so that I only have two volunteers in the kitchen and two volunteers in the dining room. I do, at the moment, the way that we are running the service, but we are not providing the full breakfast that we previously provided, which is unfortunate. We used to provide a fresh fruit salad every morning with yoghurt and cereal but we have not been able to provide that. Even if I still had all those volunteers, I could not fit them in the kitchen safely to adhere to social distancing.

**THE CHAIR:** Have you received any formal advice about what you can and cannot do, or has it really been left to your interpretation and your discretion as to how you best manage the facility to comply with the new health standards?

**Ms Wiggins:** Yes, I have pretty much made it up as I go along. That has been an area that has been really lacking—any guidance or direction. I have just relied on checking on the website daily to see what the latest updates are. In the couple of weeks before the shutdown I had to hunt around to find the hygiene posters and the COVID-19 posters that we put around the centre, and then make up the procedures as we went along following that evidence. I think, yes, it certainly would have been nice to provide a bit more support in that area, because I am not a specialist in infectious diseases and I have had to make this up based on what I have read online.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Ms Wiggins, for coming in and sharing your experiences with us today. It is very much appreciated. This committee is going to be going for a while so please keep us posted, and if there is anything in particular that you feel we should know, please get in touch with the committee secretary; we would be delighted to hear it. Again, thank you very much for appearing today, and for all that you and the volunteers do for Canberra.

**Ms Wiggins:** Okay. Thank you very much.

**GILBERT, MR TRAVIS**, Executive Officer, ACT Shelter Association

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Gilbert, CEO of ACT Shelter, thank you very much for joining us today. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of that statement?

**Mr Gilbert:** That is correct; I do.

**THE CHAIR:** Great. The proceedings are being recorded for Hansard and, of course, we are being webstreamed. Do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to give?

**Mr Gilbert:** I do, and I will keep it very brief, in light of the time delay that I have already caused. The first thing I would say is that the importance of having a safe and secure roof over our heads has never really been made clearer than during this COVID-19 crisis. We are constantly reminded that staying home helps to save lives and I certainly believe that to be true. In our sector we have said for a long time that the people who can stay home are the fortunate ones, and throughout this crisis ACT Shelter and our members have continued, and will continue, to keep working to uphold everyone's right to a safe, secure, appropriate and affordable home that meets their needs.

We have highlighted for many years, in a high cost of living city like Canberra, how difficult it can be to raise a family, go to work, look for work, maintain your health and stay connected and engaged with the local community without a safe and affordable home. And under the current pandemic crisis the importance of a home has been brought home more than ever. Without a bathroom, without hot water and without basic access to things like soap, how do you follow Health Directorate guidelines? And if you are couch surfing, how do you maintain social distancing, practise handwashing and those basic hygiene techniques, and minimise your contact with others?

In public health terms, the community is probably only as safe as the lowest level of safety afforded to some community members. Ultimately, this means that people experiencing homelessness are, in our opinion, more susceptible to the very worst impacts of something like COVID-19 because they may well have compromised immune systems because of the impact of a minimal history of successful tenancy.

I would like to thank and acknowledge MLAs for the open access that we have had to your offices throughout this crisis. When we have needed to, we have been able to speak to all three parties in the Assembly, and a really important feature of the ACT is that we have access to our elected representatives when it is needed. I would also like to thank our experienced and skilled specialist workers across housing and homelessness services. They have never been more essential. We have seen significant efforts very early on to adapt models of service delivery during what has been quite a challenging time for most Canberrans, I would imagine.

We have seen some escalations in mental health and psychological distress at some of

our homelessness sites and supported housing providers, and we have seen a willingness by the minister and directorates to acknowledge what we have put forward in terms of concerns raised by providers to us. We have also very recently seen the package of, I think, in the vicinity of \$2 million worth of domestic and family violence and homelessness-specific measures announced by the government. We have seen the passage of those omnibus bills by the Assembly to look at which pieces of legislation need to be amended, having regard to the pandemic crisis. I will probably leave my opening statement there and let you ask me the questions that you would like answers to.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Gilbert. How curtailed have staff in this sector been by the rules that are in place regarding physical interactions with people?

**Mr Gilbert:** I think it is fair to say that initially we thought it might be quite challenging to deliver things like complex case management to people. One of the interesting things that I have noted is the high importance that clients or guests of services place on those face-to-face interactions. Sadly, it may be that that is the only supportive voice that some people hear in an entire week. So we are hearing concerns about the impact of phone-based counselling and whether that will be sufficient for some people. I think services have managed to adapt incredibly well, though. We have heard that March was a very long month. April has been a very short month. I do not know whether that is telling us how quickly people have adapted to the changed environment in which we find ourselves, but, yes, certainly I would like to understand better from a client's perspective those impacts and how they see it.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thank you, Mr Gilbert, for appearing today. You may have heard me asking a question of Mr Griffiths—and you were touching on it before—about the safety that is provided by having a roof. The use, I think, and the proposed use of hotels in the ACT has been highlighted—not just in the ACT but around Australia. I appreciate that that is not the only solution, given the importance of wraparound services for some people, but do you have any comment on how that is working and what else we need to be doing to make sure as many people as possible, particularly at this time but all the time, have access to safe and secure accommodation?

**Mr Gilbert:** Yes. I guess one of the things that I was struck by was the South Australian response. It brings home the importance of something called a by-name list of people experiencing homelessness in a community. That is brought about by something that Adelaide and a number of other cities do. It is called Connections Week, where, twice a year, they go out with a community of volunteers—I know in a couple of states the minister and their staff have joined these volunteers—and interview people sleeping outside, using something called a vulnerability indicator service prioritisation decision and assessment tool, a VI-SPDAT.

In South Australia, having that by-name list meant that they had the photo, the name, and the list of needs, so they were able to accommodate 227 rough sleepers within a week in hotel rooms. I know that in other states that did not have ready access to the by-name list the process took a little bit longer. I suppose, for the basics, the hotel room enables access to hot water and to soap—to those core personal protective equipment or infection control basics.

Providers and specialist practitioners would be better qualified to answer questions around the appropriateness of hotel rooms for that wraparound support that you talked about, Tara, but they do give private, self-contained spaces for counselling. The appropriateness of the hotel might be determined on the basis of how easy social distancing is—how much common area there is and how much contact you need to have with staff on your way to the lift to get to and from your room. But my understanding is that we are seeing a number of people brokered into hotels and motels in the ACT now. I know that OneLink has had brokerage to do this. The Domestic Violence Crisis Service has a long history of brokering people—largely women and children—into hotels and motels where they can deliver place-based wraparound support.

So my understanding is that is happening. I am wondering whether there is value, in the future, in looking at something like that registry or the Connections Week survey so that we have got a really accessible list of exactly who is sleeping unsheltered in the Canberra community and what their needs are, so that we can immediately respond to those needs in future.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Gilbert. That sounds like a wonderful suggestion.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** I am not totally clear. You said clearly that some people are going into hotels and motels. Have we actually provided enough shelter in the ACT for the homeless of the ACT, to the best of your knowledge?

**Mr Gilbert:** I guess OneLink would have the numbers for you, Caroline; I do not. As I was walking around the other day I still noticed people sleeping outside, but CatholicCare tell me that some of the people they have reached out to are not ready to accept that invitation to come inside into a hotel or a motel. I would not want to see people forced to do anything that they do not want to do, but I think there is still a need out there.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Okay. Clearly, COVID-19 has had, and will have, an even more huge economic impact, which is likely to lead to more people becoming homeless because they cannot afford to pay the rent et cetera. Have you any feeling as to what is coming for the ACT in terms of potential increase in homelessness?

**Mr Gilbert:** Yes. I think that is a really interesting question. We have seen an immediate increase in demand that OneLink and others are picking up. I have heard a figure of 17 per cent or so increase in demand, but I cannot verify that, because I do not have the data in real time. In the coming months, if we do not see immediate economic recovery, in terms of the capacity of the private sector and others to immediately rehire people, we might start to see people exhaust their savings—people perhaps like me, with modest savings. I am lucky; I have managed to keep my job and keep my hours, but if it follows the trajectory of the recession in the early 90s we will start to see an increase in homelessness over the coming months as people exhaust their savings and may not be able to immediately find work or find the same number of hours that they had.

That is something that we need to keep watch on, and look at what types of financial

assistance might be needed for that group of people. I think it is also a challenge with the rent arrears. Many people will be able to negotiate a deferral of rent arrears, but that might mean they face a huge lump-sum payment in a few months time, when they may not have found work again or found that their hours have gone back up to where they were when they were in a position to pay the rent.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** I realise this is a huge question. Do you have any suggestions as to what we can do about what you are talking about—the forthcoming even worse problems?

**Mr Gilbert:** I guess one of the good things that we have seen in the last couple of days is a capacity for the Conflict Resolution Service. I know this was a proposal that your office flagged a few weeks ago, Caroline, not that you had selected a provider, but there is that opportunity for tenants and landlords to have a conversation with a mediator in the room. I think one of the key things will be transparency around how much those debts will make a tenant liable for.

Tenants also need to understand the position of landlords in this situation, because while some banks may have deferred mortgage payments and other things, it is probably no good a tenant living in a property and not being able to pay rent—and enough rent seekers like me seeking a good deal for them—if the bank then comes calling for the loan on the investor. I suppose what I am getting to is that there will be a need for financial assistance from someone, somewhere, because ultimately mortgage repayments are a debt that someone will call in and rent is a debt that someone will call in. And if the individual owner or tenant does not have the capacity to pay, somebody may need to step in.

**MR PETTERSSON:** As we respond to the COVID crisis, we have implemented a whole suite of changes. I was wondering, as we essentially emerge out the other end of the COVID crisis, what changes we have implemented now that you would like to see continued into more normal times?

**Mr Gilbert:** We have seen the significant importance of security of tenure. One of the challenges in private rental, because we are dealing with an investment product and an asset class, is that people are free to dispose of that asset class when the time is right for them in terms of when the capital gain is right.

Some of you may have seen in the last week or so a proposal from National Shelter, the Master Builders Association, the Community Housing Industry Association and the CFMMEU, around a national stimulus for 30,000 social housing properties. That stimulus would be kicked off with a proposal to renovate and bring up to scratch some of those existing public and community housing properties that might be older and need some work done to keep them habitable. I think there is a real need for people on lower incomes to have a safety net of housing that is let at a proportion of their income, with a strong safety net in terms of security of tenure, where the owners are in it for different reasons other than to safeguard their retirement income or to provide an investment stream to supplement their costs of living, if that makes sense.

**MRS DUNNE:** Thanks for persisting with us today, Mr Gilbert. My question is similar to that which I have asked other witnesses in the sector. Have you seen in this

period, say since the beginning of March, a change in the profile of clients? I know that you are anticipating—we have discussed it—an upswing in clients if things do not come back quickly economically, but at the moment are you seeing a change in the profile of clients?

**Mr Gilbert:** Yes. I think it is fair to say that OneLink and other service providers have seen a change in terms of people—I probably should not say this—who have traditionally complex needs. We have seen, I understand, an uptick in presentations of people who simply need accommodation they can afford.

We have also seen a situation where there have been older Canberrans—it might be the providers that I have heard from, but it seems to be older single women—who were accommodated fairly safely, couch surfing with relatives or friends, but when people became aware of the need to social distance and the ease with which COVID-19 can apparently be transmitted as a droplet infection, they started to say, “Well, actually, we’d prefer it if you didn’t say here.” So we have seen an upswing in demand from clients with low support needs who were in accommodation where they thought they were secure—and where they had been living, in some cases, for years—now presenting, needing self-contained accommodation, because the people they were living with are unable or unwilling to accept the increased risk of having people who cannot isolate to a bedroom.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Gilbert, for presenting to us today. As I have said to the earlier witnesses, please keep us posted and let us know if there is anything the committee can advocate for, to help you in the role that you are playing in the sector. Do you have any concluding comments?

**Mr Gilbert:** Only to thank the committee for persisting with me this morning and to thank all MLAs for the work that you have been doing. I have certainly seen a higher visibility throughout this pandemic, and I think it is reassuring to see our elected representatives out there and willing to answer questions when they are put to them.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Gilbert. A transcript of this hearing will be sent through to you in the coming weeks. Please review that. I would also like to say you have a wonderfully arranged bookcase behind you—a colour-coded bookcase. I think we have all been admiring that.

**Mr Gilbert:** Excellent. Thank you.

**FAULDER, MR CHARLIE**, Committee member and authorised spokesperson  
Tenants' Union ACT

**THE CHAIR:** Good morning, Mr Faulder, from the Tenants' Union. It is a pleasure to have you with us. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

**Mr Faulder:** Yes, I can confirm that I do.

**THE CHAIR:** Before we go to questions, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to present?

**Mr Faulder:** Yes, Mr Coe; thank you for that opportunity. I have a brief one. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge and celebrate the first Australians on whose traditional lands we meet and pay respects to elders past, present and emerging. I wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and region—never ceded; always was; always will be.

I am the former principal solicitor of the Tenants' Union ACT and I am now a committee member and authorised spokesperson. Since being defunded earlier this year, the Tenants' Union ACT has been trying to remain active in advocating for renters in the ACT, particularly in relation to legislative reform. This has been hampered by an absence of funding in any form and the ACT government no longer including the Tenants' Union in discussions.

The Tenants' Union are of the view that our absence is probably reflected in the amendments made to the Residential Tenancies Act because of the pandemic. There are some notable omissions or issues that have been outlined in our written submissions.

While still working to update our website, we re-entered the space earlier, due to the pandemic and our concern about the dearth of information available for renters, there being no ACT legal service dealing with private tenancies or occupancies that is working with other tenancy organisations across the country, and the misinformation that has been provided.

Unfortunately, and to the dismay of the Tenants' Union, information provided by our tenancy advice service replacement has not always been accurate. This extends to information unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. The CEO of Legal Aid has been notified that there are errors in their fact sheets, but, to date, the errors have not been rectified and there has been no attempt to liaise with me or the Tenants' Union to address the errors.

In terms of the pandemic and the impact on renters, the Tenants' Union's major concerns lie around there being no protections for occupants, one of the most vulnerable renting groups in the territory; lessors still being able to seek terminations for reasons other than rent arrears, such as wanting to sell the property; renters in fixed terms being unable to end their tenancies easily; no requirements for negotiation

and wholly inadequate incentives for lessors to negotiate with renters; and the significant likelihood that vast numbers of renters will accrue large rent arrears and be unable to repay these in an adequate time frame, leading to the very real possibility of eviction once the moratorium is over.

Whilst the ACT provisions are ahead of those in the Northern Territory, they lag behind other jurisdictions—for example, renters qualifying as impacted if their rent exceeds 30 per cent of their income, and compulsory conciliation if no agreement can be reached between renter and landlord, with 25 per cent of income used as a benchmark.

Whilst lessors and grantors may also be affected by the pandemic, lessors and grantors start from a position of greater privilege than most renters. We are talking about homes for renters and investments for lessors and grantors. In these difficult times it is not unreasonable to expect investors to carry more of the burden.

**THE CHAIR:** In terms of the practical support that the Tenants' Union used to provide when you were funded, compared to what you are able to do now, what services are lacking in the ACT right now that you think would be beneficial?

**Mr Faulder:** A strong voice for renters. Legal Aid are a government agency, and whilst I understand that they were certainly involved in discussions around the pandemic legislative reform, it is unclear to what extent they are advocating for renters, because it is not their traditional role to do such a thing. That has generally been the role of advocacy groups, such as community legal centres.

The Tenants' Union remains engaged with, for example, Better Renting, Canberra Community Law, the national tenants' unions, ACTCOSS and ACT Shelter in relation to what is happening in the territory space. To my knowledge—I could be wrong—Legal Aid is not engaged in those discussions, which means there is no group with a long history and extensive knowledge in relation to private renting in the territory doing that work. That is the first thing that is lacking.

The next one is a difficult one because it is difficult to ascertain exactly how Legal Aid's new service is operating. I had the benefit of reading the transcript of the evidence Dr Boersig gave before this inquiry, and I note that there was reference made to information being provided to renters. Yes, renters, and most people, certainly, want information, but information and legal advice are not the same thing. With information, as most people would recognise, the line is a little blurred. What many people want is advice specific to their circumstances. Information is broadbrush. You can put up a fact sheet and that is information. You can tell someone about the legislative reforms around the pandemic for tenancies; that is information. What many people want is advice specific to their circumstances.

Legal Aid's approach generally with its help line—this is across the years—has been simply to provide information. At some point, some people make it through to get advice. One of the other difficulties—and we have not been able to ascertain how this works—is the consistency of that advice. If a tenant rings up and gets legal advice—they have made it past the first stage of information and they want advice specific to their circumstances—the next time they call, they will not want to have to repeat that

information to the next person. It is difficult for the Tenants' Union to ascertain how that is working at Legal Aid and whether or not it is operating in that manner, because if you get a different person simply giving you a repeat of the same information and you repeat your story every time you ring, it is not a good use of resources, for starters, and ultimately it is very frustrating for the caller.

It is possible that there is a lack of sufficient advice. I have no doubt that Legal Aid give out a lot of information and that their figures will reflect an extraordinarily large amount of information being given. But as to advice, I do not know, and that is where I think there may also be a gap.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thanks very much for appearing. In your submission there was quite a bit about the reliance on the negotiation. In the last few days there has been the announcement of the Conflict Resolution Service providing the mediation service. Does that allay your concerns regarding the negotiation aspects?

**Mr Faulder:** To an extent, Ms Cheyne, yes, because there is a power differential—most of us would recognise that—between lessors, grantors and renters. However, one of the difficulties that even the CRS will face is that when you are negotiating outcomes each party needs to have come to the point of deciding what is their best outcome, their worst outcome and what outcome they are willing to settle for.

In these circumstances, the positions of the parties are generally so far apart, in that you have renters who want to pay an extremely limited amount of rent, certainly if they have gone down to JobSeeker or JobKeeper, and you have lessors, many of whom will have mortgages, who are not wanting reductions of that kind when they are not getting anything back. It is relying very much on altruism, which I think is where a significant difficulty will lie. The incentives provided by the ACT government for lessors are wholly inadequate to enable there to be large-scale uptake to assist renters in this case.

An example would be where other jurisdictions have done other things or are trying to do other things. An example might be where the government steps in to provide additional funding to tenants if they meet certain requirements. For example, if your rent was \$500 a week and the lessor agreed to reduce it with their \$100 input, and \$100 matched by the government under the land tax scheme, that is based on the tenant providing a budget or something. The government says, “These people are still in financial hardship and are going to accrue arrears here. We agree to pay a top-up amount.”

This will probably have the biggest impact. I want to allay any concerns that members might have that you will get hordes of people applying who would otherwise be ineligible—that they are not entitled; that they have not lost or suffered, other than through the general suffering that the public is experiencing. This is limited to people who have genuine hardship. Yes, it does help to an extent, of course. However, they will be confronted with the same difficulty, and there is no conciliation. There is no requirement or ability to make binding agreements. That is an issue, I think.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** You paint a pretty grim picture of what is likely to happen in the future. We have also listened to ACT Shelter, who were possibly even grimmer,

actually. Given your legal knowledge, what do you think will happen where we have tenants who cannot pay the rent, there is an eviction freeze for a period of time and debts have accumulated? What will happen to these people?

**Mr Faulder:** As it stands, with the current legislation and the current proposals by the ACT government, those people stand to be evicted in the relatively near future. At the end of the moratorium, whether that is extended beyond 27 July or not, at the end of the three months a lessor could issue a notice to remedy for the rent arrears accrued in this time, and issue a notice to vacate. That matter will then go to the tribunal, and the tribunal, at present, is bound to operate under the legislation, which looks at the issue simply in terms of rent arrears—can a tenant afford to pay the rent ongoing and can they make repayments towards the rent arrears?

On the face of it, certainly in three months time, there is not necessarily an indication that all of these people will be back at work and off JobSeeker or JobKeeper. The tribunal may be very hard pressed to consider that these people could pay the rent on an ongoing basis, let alone pay off large arrears. The options for the tribunal are then extraordinarily limited and come down to this: if they are not satisfied, the best the tenant can get is three weeks to vacate. That is the end of that discretion.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** That is pretty tough. Would the tenants also tend to be forced into bankruptcy because of the rental arrears, or would they be in the position—I cannot say this is a positive position—that they have lost their tenancy but at least they do not have thousands of dollars of debt, or will they do both?

**Mr Faulder:** It is difficult for me to answer this. It is not my area of law. There is certainly the possibility that people will declare bankruptcy, renters or otherwise, because of what has arisen. Obviously, there is then an issue about the debt owing to different types of debtors and whether or not that is still a debt that could be considered by the tribunal. Bankruptcy is not ideal for anyone. Whilst it may be the best for that person, if they get that appropriate financial and legal advice, it is not a great outcome.

One way around this, and this is a simple way around it, is that if tenants have accrued recent arrears during this period—the moratorium period, if you like—a lessor cannot seek termination for those rent arrears. They can seek an order that the rent arrears be paid. For example, they might go to ACAT and say, “I want \$50 a week or \$100 a week repaid”—or more, if the tenant has entered into employment again. But a prohibition on seeking termination for rent arrears that have arisen as a result of this pandemic would go some way towards resolving the issue, and that is quite a simple solution. It does not mean that the landlord is not going to get their money; it just means that tenants will not have their backs against the wall, which at the moment they do.

**MRS DUNNE:** You mentioned in your opening comments that some of the information—I am presuming you meant on the Legal Aid website—is incorrect. Could you elaborate on that?

**Mr Faulder:** Yes. There is information on the Legal Aid website and also information that was posted or provided during a live Facebook Q&A session. One

example, off the top of my head, in terms of the fact sheets, is information in relation to subletting. The information on that fact sheet in relation to subletting is legally incorrect. The fact sheet specifically says that a lessor cannot unreasonably refuse permission for a tenant to have a sub-lessee. The legislation makes no provision at all for that. There is no provision in the ACT for that, so it is legally incorrect information on that fact sheet.

In terms of the Facebook Live information, some of that related to the pandemic, and the reforms at that stage had not yet been tabled. But information was provided as to what the person suspected the information would be, and that was provided to however many people were watching. In addition, information was provided about rent increases not related to the pandemic which was also incorrect. They are some examples. There would be others, but I know there is very limited time.

**THE CHAIR:** I understand that question was in fact the very question that Mr Pettersson had as well, in terms of that correction of information. Thank you very much for joining us today. I am sorry that it was so brief. Please keep us posted. This is, of course, an evolving issue and one that I think will be around for some time. A copy of the transcript will be sent to you in the coming weeks. Please check that and please keep us posted. Thank you for appearing today.

**Mr Faulder:** Thank you.

**BRIERLEY, MR ANTHONY**, General Manager, Australian Hotels Association, ACT Branch

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome the Australian Hotels Association to this pandemic response hearing of the ACT Assembly. I understand, Anthony, that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the statement?

**Mr Brierley:** Yes, I do.

**THE CHAIR:** I remind you that this hearing is being recorded for Hansard purposes and is also being streamed online. Before we kick off with questions, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to make?

**Mr Brierley:** I do. Thanks for the opportunity to appear. AHA ACT is the industry body representing Canberra's accommodation and licensed hospitality industry. We have a diverse membership consisting of accommodation hotels, pubs, bars, taverns, nightclubs, licensed restaurants and licensed cafes. Our industry contributes \$2 billion in economic activity to the ACT, has an annual payroll of over \$200 million and ordinarily employs about 14,000 workers.

We are the only locally based hospitality industry association and, as such, we are uniquely positioned to represent the views of Canberra hospitality businesses and provide solutions within the ACT's political and legislative context. I might leave it there, in the interests of time. I am happy to take any questions.

**THE CHAIR:** Obviously, the tourism and hospitality sectors have been hit very hard as a result of the decisions that have been taken by governments right across the country. What additional support, especially by way of taxes and regulations, does the industry need in order to have the best chance of getting through this period?

**Mr Brierley:** To start off with, we have obviously been working very closely with government, both the ACT government and the commonwealth government. We have welcomed some of the support that we have received from the ACT government to date. That includes things like the 12-month waiving of liquor licences, the waiving of payroll tax obligations for our industry until September, the waiving of outdoor dining fees, commercial rate relief, the work that is going on with regard to commercial leases, and the jobs for Canberrans fund. Like any household or any business, the ACT government has a limited pot of money. The coffers have a bottom, if that makes sense. There is limited availability as to what can be done, in line with the responsible approach to their own budgetary position.

In terms of future funding that the hospitality industry might need to be able to come through this crisis, one thing that will be required with regard to reopening the industry is that there will be a requirement, similar to the responsible service of alcohol or responsible conduct of gaming, for new hygiene training for employees in our industry. There is an opportunity for the ACT government to look at some funding there, to help our industry reopen safely and in a financially viable manner.

There may be an opportunity for something like funding of thermometers for licensed venues to have, to test patrons. That would give Canberrans who are going out a great deal of security and relief, to know that people are being tested at the door to see whether they may be ill or perhaps are out and are in danger of infecting other people. There are still things that can be done, but I would say that, to date, the ACT government has provided very welcome relief to our industry.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thank you for appearing today. I appreciate just how hard the sector has been hit. What percentage of the businesses in your association do you believe at this point in time will not recover or reopen?

**Mr Brierley:** Certainly, more broadly across the industry, there will be a lot of businesses that, tragically, do not come through. I am probably not bold enough to put a percentage on it. In ordinary times licensed hospitality operates with pretty slim margins. This has been an external hit that a lot of businesses will not be able to recover from. There are over 500 liquor licences in the ACT. Competition is rife. It is not like there are rivers of gold or cash reserves that people have to rely on.

I think we will see a much smaller industry on the other side. I hope that, if there is one benefit that can come from that tragic circumstance, it might be that the industry itself is more sustainable. In the ACT we are characterised by a high turnover of businesses that open and shut. That is not good for anyone. It is not good for the operator, and it creates a certain dynamic around employment. Having businesses open and close challenges suppliers right through the supply chain.

In short, to answer your question, a lot of businesses are not going to reopen. I just hope that we can take a positive out of that tragic circumstance somehow.

**MS CHEYNE:** Are there businesses which at the start of the pandemic looked like they would shut their doors for good and which, since the initiatives from the commonwealth and ACT governments, have been able to at least keep ticking along?

**Mr Brierley:** I think the financial measures provided by both governments have enabled hibernation to be bearable. That has not meant that hibernation is without pain. Hibernation is not about a bear going to sleep in winter and waking up in spring. This hibernation still hurts. I would not necessarily characterise it as ticking along, but it has certainly meant that they have not gone under straightaway.

I was surprised, when this started really hurting from about mid-March, because businesses at that stage that I thought were okay were reporting to me that there was real financial strife that they were finding themselves in. The impact of this has been enormous. While the support that has been provided by the commonwealth government and the ACT government has been considerable, it does not—and I do not know that it possibly can—provide enough support so that there is no pain at all. I think that is just part of it. When governments close an industry, it does really hurt. I do not know that anything necessarily can be done to overcome that.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** This is possibly slightly outside your knowledge. Your members' venues are typically where small-scale live music is performed in Canberra

and everywhere else. Do you have any idea what sort of impact closing your venues, closing your members, is having on the live music industry?

**Mr Brierley:** Yes, they have been hit, just like all other suppliers for the licensed hospitality industry. There is nowhere, unfortunately, to perform. Those people are out of work, just like the food runners, just like waitressing staff and just like hotel reception staff. It has been considerable. Some of them have managed to find some source of income by live-streaming performances, but I cannot imagine that that is helping them to overcome this in any real, meaningful way.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Can you see any way that things could change so that that associated industry can get back to something resembling normal work?

**Mr Brierley:** What could change is that as soon as it is safe, responsible and financially viable to do so, the industry is opened up again. That is what we are waiting on. I am sure there are other people who are more familiar with the live music industry itself who might have alternative solutions, but, for me, the number one solution for all of this pain is for the industry to be able to reopen as soon as it is safe to do so.

**MRS DUNNE:** Thank you, Mr Brierley, for attending today. Have you had conversations with kindred organisations and with the government about what you would see as a road map back to reopening licensed venues and the like?

**Mr Brierley:** Yes. The AHA national organisation made a submission to the national cabinet. I understand that that received some media attention during the week. The ACT branch has also made a submission to the ACT government around what reopening could look like. The most important consideration in that discussion is providing the industry with some certainty around what sort of time line we are working to. I think it will be staged and gradual, and there are valid reasons why that will be the case. But we do need to understand how the environment can change so that we can move from those stages.

There may well be an announcement today—who knows?—regarding the relaxation of some restrictions. It would be unhelpful if any such announcement was based just on the number of people inside a venue or in an outdoor space in a venue such as a beer garden. We think that a better approach is to stage a reopening based around a percentage of your ordinary occupancy. Ordinarily, occupancy is based on the principle of one person per one square metre. With social distancing, that has obviously increased to one person per four square metres, which effectively reduces your occupancy by four. If you could have 100 people previously, with the current social distancing parameters you might be able to have 25—25 per cent of what you might ordinarily have. That is where we would probably have to start. Unfortunately, it is not financially viable to operate at 25 per cent, but I do think that has to be the starting point.

We do need to understand how quickly we can move from 25 per cent to 50 per cent, from 50 to 75 and from 75 to 100. I should not say too much more than that, apart from that we desperately need a time line.

**MRS DUNNE:** You have made the point—and it seems pretty obvious—that a 25 per cent occupancy rate as a starting position is probably not financially viable for the venue operator.

**Mr Brierley:** No, it is not.

**MRS DUNNE:** Would you find that there would be people in those circumstances who just would not bother to reopen until they could get further along the—

**Mr Brierley:** Yes, definitely. I would be surprised if many businesses open until they have 100 per cent occupancy again. As I was saying at the start, it is hard enough making money when you have 100 per cent occupancy. When you are kneecapped and only have 25 per cent or 50 per cent, there is very little expectation that venues will be profitable.

That is the AHA's preference—that there is a staged approach based on a percentage. There may well be another approach that is decided by the government, such as 10 people in an inside space and 20 people in an outside space. That definitely would be unworkable for our industry.

**MR PETTERSSON:** I have noticed a proliferation of staycation ads from local hotels. I was curious as to how effective this campaign has been and whether you potentially have any further information on the vacancy rates of hotels in the ACT at the moment.

**Mr Brierley:** Instead of vacancy rates I will put it the opposite way. I will talk about occupancy rates in terms of the percentage of beds that are filled within a hotel. Ordinarily, hotels might trade at about 70 per cent, or maybe a little bit higher. At the moment, if someone gets 25 per cent of their beds full on any given night, they are ecstatic. More often than not they might have an occupancy rate of about 15 per cent. That is one-sixth of usual busyness.

We are fortunate in the ACT that staycations are allowed. My understanding is that our public health direction is unique around the country in that respect. It is providing a revenue stream for accommodation hotels but certainly nowhere near what they would normally expect.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing this morning. You made mention of the fact that you have sent a submission to the government. If appropriate, the committee would also appreciate seeing that submission. If you are able to see whether that is possible, that would be good. A copy of the transcript will be sent to you in the coming weeks. Please review that and keep us posted on any developments or anything that the committee should be aware of in the coming months.

**Mr Brierley:** Thanks for hearing from me.

**LAMBERT, MR WES**, Chief Executive Officer, Restaurant & Catering Australia

**THE CHAIR:** It is a pleasure to have Mr Wes Lambert, from Restaurant & Catering Australia, join us today for this hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

**Mr Lambert:** I do.

**THE CHAIR:** Before we ask questions, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to make?

**Mr Lambert:** As you all know, the hospitality industry has been one of the most, if not the most, affected from COVID-19. We are working with the state premiers' offices, including the ACT Legislative Assembly, as well as the national cabinet, on the solutions to get hospitality industries open sooner rather than later. We expect today to hear from national cabinet about a pathway forward for our industry to reopen. We sit on multiple reopening committees with the premiers' offices of multiple states in order to effect those openings.

**THE CHAIR:** The association came out, in the last week or so, with a plan for reopening. What do you think is the optimum way to reopen the physical premises for the hospitality sector?

**Mr Lambert:** Ultimately, we have presented the premiers and national cabinet with restaurant and catering reopening guidelines that were drawn from many industry associations around the world that have already begun to reopen their hospitality businesses, as well as the WHO and the Australian health guidelines. Those have been lauded by the Prime Minister as well as the state premiers as the first step.

We know that each state will be adopting specific guidelines that are tailored more for their state. We know that most states intend to have guidelines that will most likely be attached to the food handler, the food safety certificates or possibly your liquor licence; it depends on which mechanism they choose to go with, whether it is the liquor authorities that are reviewing your compliance or whether it is your council. The current mechanism is that, when you have a health inspection, it would come normally from local council. They enforce your food safety and food handler certificate requirements.

Adding a line to those certifications in each state or territory is much easier because it can refer to COVID-safe training, which the states and territories are expecting could be accredited. However, it may be a micro-credential, as each industry is quite different, so the industries will need to create their own COVID-safe training that is specific to those industries.

As far as timing goes, we certainly understand that social distancing is the phrase of the day, and tracking and tracing. We believe that tracking and tracing is the paramount issue to avoid any outbreaks and, if there is one, to be able to track and

trace to avoid any community transmission. There is a lot of controversy around tracking and tracing; however, it is happening every time there is an outbreak. The health officials track and trace everyone who has come into contact with someone who is infected.

In our industry, specifically, restaurants have been taking bookings and writing down people's names and phone numbers for decades. In some restaurants it is almost impossible to get in without a booking. They would have your name and phone number; it is just normal. When you turn up at a restaurant, if you are waiting for a table, they will often take your name and phone number. It is not really a civil liberties issue; it is just the way our industry has operated for a long time.

We also operate on the tenet of no shirt, no shoes, no service. Every business in Australia has the legal right to refuse service to anyone for any reason. It cannot be for a list of reasons that are discriminatory. You cannot discriminate against someone based upon any number of things that I will not go into. It is an exhaustive list. One of those at present is the COVID-19 app.

However, I can certainly say, "You need to register into my business in order to come in, because we need to make sure that this business stays COVID safe and that tracking and tracing is in place." We reference this to New Zealand. You must register in a business register to enter any business in New Zealand, period—grocery store, retail store, hospitality venue. There is a business register of every single person that walks into every business.

When I walked in to the Legislative Assembly, I had to put down my name and phone number. When I walked in to meet with Christian Porter a couple of months ago at Parliament House, I had to put down my name and phone number. Tracking and tracing of people is tantamount to what happens in our society. It is just that when you tell people they have to do it, they get all ruffled. But when it is just the normal course of doing business, they do not.

In our industry no-one wants to be the *Ruby Princess*. No-one wants to be the wedding venue where a particular business or business type becomes the new pandemic or the new spike in infection rates. Really, the best way to avoid that is by tracking and tracing.

In addition, all of the states and territories are mandating that if anyone—customer or employee—has any respiratory symptoms, they cannot enter that place of business, period. That is discrimination based upon your health status. Civil liberties have gone out of the window. Normally, you could not discriminate against someone on the basis of their health status. But if you are sneezing and coughing, you are not going to be openly welcomed into any businesses for the foreseeable future.

It is about tempering expectations. The COVID crisis is raging in other countries, and it is important that we understand that. I would really like to hug someone in public right now, but the law says I can't. The country has taken away my civil liberty to hug someone. Let us bring it down a little and understand that tracking and tracing are paramount.

The next is removing touch points. We need to remove touch points in businesses. If you walk into a retail store, technically, you can touch nothing. If all that you are doing is browsing and walking around in a retail store, you do not have to touch anything. You do not have to touch the doors, you do not have to touch tables, chairs or utensils—nothing. Ultimately, you will have plastic hangers and racks and racks of clothes. We all know that COVID-19 can live for six hours on a plastic surface. I am pretty sure that Myer will not have a team of cleaners going around and constantly spraying the hangers of tens of thousands of items. There will certainly be an expectation that people continue to wash their hands, that there are alcohol stations all around retail businesses, including restaurants, so that you can wash your hands once you have touched something, so that the spread of infection goes down.

Our principles are really about tracking and tracing, reducing the touch points within a business and the regular health responses that employees need to be employing in a heavy customer-based situation.

**MS CHEYNE:** In terms of numbers of people, I appreciate that bookings make perfect sense. But in terms of maximum numbers of people in a restaurant or a cafe, should it continue to be one person for every four square metres, if they open, or should it be an arbitrary number—for example, 10 people inside and 20 people outside?

**Mr Lambert:** I will tell you in advance that if you go to Safe Work Australia, the law says one per four square metres, where practical. It actually is not a tenet in law; it is where practical. They always do that; so it is just the government that has come out and said “official”. It is not actually official. There is no medical evidence that one per four had anything to do with it; there is none. There was no medical evidence that one per four had anything to do with virus transmission. 1.5 metres between people is a sneeze radius. That is it; it is just a sneeze radius. They modelled how far a sneeze will travel.

Ultimately, if you say 10, I can tell you that, of the 1,505 current accommodation and food services businesses in the ACT, 150 will open, because they will not be able to pay their bills at an arbitrary number of 10 people inside and 20 outside. We are going into winter. No-one is going to sit outside in the ACT, so it is arbitrary. It is not really practical. Look at some of the restaurants around Civic. Look at pretty much all of the venues in the ACT, excluding the regions. They seat 50, 60 or 100 people because they are used to doing a lot of political and lobbying business.

Ultimately, an arbitrary number of 10 has no reference to the size or the scale of the cost of operations. If you social distance in an office, if you social distance in a government office, if you social distance in a manufacturing facility, if you social distance in the airport, if you social distance in a grocery store, if you social distance in a retail store, why wouldn't you just social distance in a restaurant, cafe or caterer? 1.5 metres between tables and no bar service: that pretty much guarantees that people are 1.5 metres away from each other. Mark the floor at the counter, if it is counter service, so that people will social distance while they wait, like they are now for takeaway coffees, like they are now in retail stores, lining up for the registers. In restaurants, you could social distance the line to the bathroom. You just have to be thinking through solutions.

Businesses cannot survive more than a few weeks paying full expenses—because if you open your doors the lights are on—with just an arbitrary number of people. With doing 1.5 metres between two-tops, basically, it is two people sitting together and the edge of the table between them should be 1.5 metres away. If it is a four-top then it is 1.5 metres from the backs of both people. With some of the fine-dining restaurants in Sydney, we have been speaking to them and basically they are going to turn the restaurant into all two-tops, where the edges of the table are facing each other, and they will re-lay out their restaurants in a way that allows them to have more sittings, based upon those guidelines.

In addition, that is still 50 to 60 per cent capacity, and they are only able to do that because most of the businesses that are open have pivoted to takeaway, app delivery, self-delivery, grocery, online sales and takeaway liquor. I was on the phone to liquor and gaming in Queensland before this meeting. They have no intention of stopping the takeaway liquor for restaurants in the foreseeable future because they know that those businesses need those revenue streams. If you do 1½ metres between tables, which is social distancing, it is about 50 to 60 per cent capacity. If you do one person per four square metres—that is, 25 per cent capacity—you will not have very many businesses open. They will not want to take the added expense until such time as it is 50 to 60 per cent.

The whole purpose of opening businesses is for us to learn and test if there will be spikes. So if the businesses do not open, why did you do it in the first place? It is sort of like JobKeeper. In accommodation and food services, only 54 per cent of businesses in that ANZSIC code applied for JobKeeper. Oops! It is not going to be fully subscribed, so you will not necessarily see how much benefit it would have for the industry.

If you go to an arbitrary 10, imagine Chairman & Yip with 10 people in it. They just would not open. They would say, “Sorry, we’ll wait. We’ll wait until some other tiny businesses are guinea pigs and then we’ll see.” You will not get any data from medium to large restaurants to know whether there are any transmissions because they will not open with such an arbitrarily low number. With outdoor seating, unless you are on the Sunshine Coast or further north on the east coast or you are in Darwin or Karratha, you will not get any data points about outside seating because there will not be enough people that want to sit outside in the arctic winter of Canberra.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** I have to say you are being far too harsh about Canberra. We often have glorious, sunny weather in winter, and you do see people sitting outside. Some of the places even provide a blanket.

**Mr Lambert:** Well, hold on—

**MS LE COUTEUR:** It is not good for dinner trade, I agree, but I think that with sitting outside we can have lunchtime trade. You partially answered my question. How has the pivot to home delivery and takeaways actually saved jobs in your industry? I have got takeaways in a way that I never would have done before because I have wanted to support the industry.

**Mr Lambert:** I will answer your first comment. Without all of the pollution, as global warming is toning down, it might be a harsh winter, given that there is less pollution in the air.

To answer your question, per the ABS, accommodation and food service has lost 441,000 jobs. I called the ABS yesterday and said, “I’m a little confused. Does this include stood-down employees that are continuing to be paid JobKeeper?” They said, “No. Your industry has lost, fired, made redundant or the job has disappeared for 441,000 jobs—gone.”

**MS LE COUTEUR:** How many jobs were there before? I do not know the exact size.

**Mr Lambert:** Just under 1.3 million jobs in accommodation and food service. That is all of the businesses that fall under the ANZSIC code of accommodation and food services, which is accommodation hotels, where you stay and sleep, hotels like pub hotels, pubs, clubs, nightclubs, restaurants, cafes, coffee shops and caterers—our entire industry. The ABS does not break it out any further than that. When they are comparing things like JobKeeper, they do it by ANZSIC codes.

Our industry has lost a third of its jobs. If you reopen with arbitrarily tiny numbers, maybe 40,000 of those jobs will come back. Businesses will not be able to afford to subsidise a government guinea-pig test to see if there are infections with 10 people in a venue.

**MRS DUNNE:** Thank you, Mr Lambert, for your attendance today. I want to follow on from Ms Le Couteur’s question and ask the next part. There was considerable discussion and publicity about people signing up to buy takeaway and the like and using apps. In the ACT there was an attempt—I do not know whether it is still successful—by people to set up a Canberra-based app, because it appears that some of those apps are quite expensive for restaurants to sign up to, and they lose quite a bit of their margin to the delivery company. Can you comment on the impact that the margins charged by delivery companies have on the industry generally, what they have had in this particular circumstance and how people have innovated to get around some of those?

**Mr Lambert:** First off, we sat on a committee of the Queensland government that discussed delivery fees. With respect to the recommendations of that committee, which started off being very stick shaking and sign holding, once all of the industry players, which were industry associations as well as the delivery companies, both self and app delivery, were looked at, it cost the same no matter who did it.

Let me explain that in a way that is understandable. If you are a business that uses self-delivery, which is an app that charges five per cent, they do no marketing for you. Let us say that you need to spend one per cent on your own Facebook, your own website and your own marketing. With the cost of delivering a meal from your restaurant if you use your own employee, with minimum wage plus entitlements plus all of the things that you have—payroll tax—it is about \$25 an hour.

If your employee delivers meals for you, which is an inefficient way to do it, they can deliver about three meals per hour. It costs \$8 plus five per cent plus one per cent to

deliver a meal. The average meal that is delivered in Australia is \$32. For you to deliver a meal to any of your customers, you pay \$8 of \$32—25 per cent—on the labour line, then you pay a self-delivery app five per cent and you pay for your own marketing, which we will say is one per cent. That is 31 per cent; so it costs 31 per cent of the average order for anybody to do it—for you to do it or for a third party to do it. That is the cost basis.

There was no dispute in this committee. They were provided with all of the evidence from all sources—IBISWorld, the app delivery companies, all of them, all sizes, from Bopple to Uber—and everybody had a general consensus that it costs about 30 per cent of every order for it to be delivered. The large app companies, which now control about 90 per cent of the market for six million consumers, make about a three per cent profit margin. They were very candid and open to the committee that they were basically high turnover, meaning \$900 million in commissions, but actually they were only making about three per cent because the cost of delivery is the cost of delivery.

It is absolutely great; we support the small guys like Bopple and Mr Yum, but the cost to a restaurant is the same whether they do it or whether they use a third-party app. A lot have turned to the third-party apps because of the marketing. At present, 65 per cent of all restaurants, cafes, caterers and coffee shops are on the large apps servicing six million consumers.

**MR PETTERSSON:** The hospitality industry has quite a reliance on temporary visa holders. Are there any shortfalls in the current provisions from the federal and ACT governments that are particularly harming the hospitality industry because those workers are not included?

**Mr Lambert:** Yes. Sixty-one per cent of employees in hospitality are casual and a lot of those are on working holidays, and that is a whole other argument. We have one of the highest proportions of temporary skilled workers. Of the 139,000 temporary skilled workers, 12 per cent work in hospitality, which is the second largest cohort behind technology. And they are all starving at this point. They have either left Australia, which means that, with your favourite sushi restaurant, your favourite French restaurant, your favourite trade waiters in your higher end restaurants and a lot of your cultural restaurants that had someone as an executive chef or a head chef from another country who was the creator of that concept, they have either had to leave or close their business down. We petitioned the federal government to add TSS workers to JobKeeper, especially since it has been undersubscribed, and we are certainly getting knocked back on all levels.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Lambert. Unfortunately, we have to leave it there; we are pressed for time. It has been very good to have you with us today. Please keep us posted. We will send through a copy of the transcript. Please check that it is accurate. As I said, please feel free to keep in touch with the committee. If you have any submissions to the ACT government or to the commonwealth, we would be very pleased to receive them as well.

**Mr Lambert:** Thank you very much.

**REES, MR GWYN**, Chief Executive, ClubsACT

**THE CHAIR:** Good afternoon, Mr Rees. Thank you for joining us for this hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response in the territory. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of that statement?

**Mr Rees:** Yes, I do.

**THE CHAIR:** We are being recorded for Hansard and we are being broadcast and webstreamed. Would you please make an opening statement if you so wish; otherwise we will go straight to questions.

**Mr Rees:** I will try and keep it brief. I want to thank the committee, on behalf of the board of ClubsACT and the 35 individual club sites that we represent, for the opportunity to appear before you today and, hopefully, give some important perspectives.

I would also like to leave the committee with two or three messages today on behalf of our member clubs. The first message is this: if our collective goal is to see our clubs survive and possibly thrive following COVID-19, we need to press a reset button. I can assert with a high level of confidence that there is an absolute willingness by clubs to work collaboratively with government, and ClubsACT is included in that.

Our clubs want to reopen as soon as possible. We believe we can do it under conditions that can reassure the community and address safety, and they can be part of these in-government impacts on revenue. Most importantly, there is a social piece here. There is little doubt in my mind that clubs were shut down because of their success. They are social hubs. They are places where people gather. And that is exactly why they are so important. For some people the club is their only social outlet.

I also want to state clearly that in recent weeks I have seen the ACT government and bureaucracy do some amazing things. I would particularly like to note the engagement of Danielle Perks from the Justice and Community Safety Directorate with our members. In terms of government support, I commend both the Chief Minister, Andrew Barr, and Gordon Ramsay for a solid support package to help our clubs for now, but there is more work to do.

I will be upfront: ClubsACT will continue to seek some form of relief for our fixed costs so that our clubs can keep as many people employed as possible for as long as they can—hopefully permanently, relief permitting. I intend to provide some further detail as part of the questioning today.

Finally, in addressing any time line to reopen clubs, I want to state clearly that whatever we may propose to the ACT government or, indeed, the federal government, noting that as I make these representations national cabinet is meeting, any decision to reopen clubs rests with government and its health experts. That is appropriate and

how it should be. Our message, however, is this: if and when the government gives an instruction that we can reopen, we will work with them and we are ready to do it safer than anyone else. There is, however, an undeniable absolute at the moment; that is, people are understandably cautious. That said, there are, however, a large number of people who want to return to some level of normality and they want to do that soon.

My final message is this: reopening will not be a simple exercise for any business, let alone clubs, but we need to take that step sooner rather than later, for no other reason than to ensure the recovery of the ACT economy and preserve jobs. Governments, to date, have been patting themselves on the back for the relief they have provided. Some of that is very good, but the narrative at times has been insensitive to the reality of what is happening on the ground. I have heard catchphrases like “Pulling the shutters down” and “Putting them in stasis or hibernation”. We are not in hibernation. Clubs have already committed hundreds of thousands of dollars to paying employees, and JobKeeper is only just landing. The bills are still coming. There are bills to pay—water, rates, gas, electricity and insurance, to name a few.

Our colleagues at the AHA framed this really well: the fact is that we are not hibernating; we are continuing to pay for the bricks and mortar businesses we love. The bear who hibernates in winter does not wake up to a debt cliff that he has to repay in the spring.

Many of my clubs are yet to grapple with this cost exercise of reopening. I know other business groups have made representations in various forms, suggesting that hospitality businesses are pivoting and doing takeaway as an example. However, they are naively or rather recklessly at times presenting a positive where none exists. In most cases it is a loss-making exercise. Many businesses will not survive under current conditions, particularly once JobKeeper ceases in the months ahead.

On a positive note, I am confident that the immediate goal for government, Labor and the Greens, or indeed the opposition, the Canberra Liberals, is to return the territory to some level of normality. Our collective goal should be to work on this together. As a key comment today, please provide that certainty to Canberra businesses soon—selfishly, to my clubs as well. Structure now what reopening will look like—a road map, if you will. The government has very capable people in the bureaucracy. Do that in consultation with us and set that time line as soon as possible.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Rees, you mentioned water, rates, gas and electricity, to name a few. What more can the ACT government do for either those fees and charges or other fees and charges to relieve some of the pressure?

**Mr Rees:** I want to be very clear that the assistance to date has been very good and very useful in addressing a number of clubs’ short-term financial distress, but I do think we can look forward and assist clubs in their economic recovery. In fact, we must be forward looking, and I am certain that is a shared goal.

Principally, I see two streams of assistance for the government to consider, the first being the banked credits or discounts set aside for land and planning matters that were accrued from the poker machine surrender scheme. As a medium-term measure, the government could consider allowing clubs to access those credits for fixed charges

and costs that they encounter from government—to be offset against. In addition, they could purpose this to employment. Using the example of the Southern Cross Club, they have estimated that the funds that they receive from the diversification fund will last for about 24 weeks for the purpose of paying those international visa holders that they are paying wages to that were not captured by JobKeeper. This is something that could be a meaningful stop-gap in the meantime, and government should consider that.

The second is developments. I think we are all agreed that the industry must be less reliant on gaming revenue. That is not to say they can, particularly now, give that up. But there are a number of clubs who have been on an active diversification pathway and at various stages have been caught up in processes with bureaucracy and planning, and they have moved at a glacial pace. There could be hundreds of millions of private sector investment, in partnership with clubs, that could be activated as part of Canberra's economic recovery. I am yet to fully collate that, or pull it together, with regard to what the potential investments would be, but I am confident they would represent important economic activity and help to preserve construction sector jobs as well.

**MS CHEYNE:** Mr Rees, thanks for appearing today. I understand that one of the clubs in the ACT is requiring staff to complete the COVID-19 infection control training, which is primarily for care workers. They have described that training as mandatory. While this looks like a commendable step, this particular club is requiring staff to complete the course in their own time. Staff are being told that when clubs reopen they will not be rostered on if they have not completed the course. You would be well aware that the Fair Work Commission says that staff should be paid for undertaking training that is mandatory. Are you aware of this direction being issued in clubs and is it widespread? Have clubs sought your advice in this space?

**Mr Rees:** Your raising it with me now is the first I have heard about the incident. I would be happy, offline, to be provided with some advice and follow that up for you.

**MS CHEYNE:** I have just recently been alerted to it. I was quite surprised but I just wanted to—

**Mr Rees:** Okay.

**MS CHEYNE:** find out whether it was something that was being commonly instituted. Thank you.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Mr Rees, you mentioned very briefly the role of pokies. Without going into a huge discussion about the positives or negatives of that, because I think the battle lines are probably well known on that subject, my question is: is it possible for the clubs to go back to operation without pokies? Would you be expecting some sort of different COVID-19 regulations for how the gaming rooms operate, noting that the machines are usually very close to each other?

**Mr Rees:** More broadly, I will deal with that as part of looking at easing restrictions. Reopening a gaming floor is a component of their business. I would see clubs opening, and opening all of the segments of their business. We know national cabinet is meeting today, and I am certainly holding my breath as to what announcements will

be coming through.

To answer your question, I have shared some advice from New South Wales with the Chief Minister's office. That advice is a plan that ClubsNSW had put to the New South Wales government. They have had that advice reviewed by an infectious diseases expert. It outlines a number of parameters under which clubs could reopen and operate.

In regard to the ACT, I also want to note the Chief Minister's concern about the ACT going before New South Wales. One of the strengths of clubs, a unique position of clubs, is that we know our members. If required, we could restrict the opening of clubs just to ACT residents, and Queanbeyan if that is allowed.

I do not see the gaming floor being different. Yes, the physical parameters of the floor would need to operate in different ways, to answer your question, Ms Le Couteur. You would have things like every second machine being apart. If the gaming commission was willing to provide some flexibility, we could put machines further apart. Additional cleaning regimes would obviously be a clear feature of that. Time could be another component, as an interim step. We are seeing that kind of approach in different states.

In terms of clubs, they are big venues. Typically, most clubs are 2,000 square metres; others are more than 5,000. We can do social distancing. We can reduce occupancy. We can implement sign-in and sign-out controls. If someone presented with flu-like symptoms, we could create an incident report, in a similar fashion to our gambling incident reports, and we could provide that information to a relevant authority.

We are ready for that conversation with government. In fact, we have already been progressing along that path. We believe we can reassure the community and further educate them, as all businesses work to a new normal.

**MRS DUNNE:** Thank you, Mr Rees, for appearing here today. I want to go back and touch on an issue raised by Ms Cheyne—that is, perhaps part of the reopening will include more training in hygiene for staff. Are you aware of appropriate training currently existing or will it have to be developed?

**Mr Rees:** Locally, I am not aware, although I understand people are looking at it. Access training do a lot of our RSA and responsible gaming certificates locally with clubs. Certainly, I know they are aware and have started looking at it. The WA government have made it mandatory over there, and I know they were developing it with the AHA. There are lots of conversations going on about developing that training. I do not think it needs to be hard, complex or onerous in any way for employees. But I am not aware of anything formal locally, to answer your question.

**MRS DUNNE:** Would you see that as part of the package that would be needed before reopening?

**Mr Rees:** Yes, it could be. I think there is a community reassurance piece there. Staff should be stepped through what the potential symptoms of COVID-19 could appear to

be. It is about getting them to understand the social distancing concepts while they are working, in addition to the importance of a cleaning regime, before a venue opens and after a venue opens, as well as periodic cleaning through the venue. All of that could be packaged together as a training module. I think it is a good community assurance piece.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Some of the most prolific users of clubs are some of the more vulnerable members of our community—older, and potentially other vulnerable groups. With the road map you have referred to for reopening clubs, is there a concern that even if there is a road map and clubs can open, people will still be concerned and worried about coming back to their clubs?

**Mr Rees:** Again, there is that important social piece about clubs—that for many people the club is their only social outlet. I think clubs can play a role in community assurance. We have big databases. We can tell people what the rules of re-entry are. We can change the physical space of the clubs. There are lots of things that clubs can do very practically that I think will reassure the community. Those things will be above and beyond what we see down at the local Bunnings or the supermarket, as an example.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Rees, for coming in today. As I have mentioned to other witnesses, if you have any particular submissions that you make to the ACT government or to any other sphere of government, please feel free to submit them to the committee as well, for our reference. As things do start to open up, please let us know how that process is going, as it is something that we will want to keep a watching brief on. Again, thank you for coming in today.

**Mr Rees:** Okay, thank you, and thank you to the other Assembly members.

**Hearing suspended from 12.31 to 12.41 p m**

**RYAN, MS LYNDAL**, ACT spokesperson, United Workers Union  
**UPASENA, MR NISHAN**, Member, United Workers Union  
**SINGH, MR GAGANDEEP**, United Workers Union  
**PAQUIBOT, MS VERONICA**, Member, United Workers Union  
**CLARKE, MS SABRINA**, Member, United Workers Union

**THE CHAIR:** Good afternoon, and welcome to this public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. Thank you for being with us today. I understand that you have each been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm that you have received that and that you understand the implications of that statement?

**Ms Ryan:** Yes.

**Mr Upasena:** I understand.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to give?

**Ms Ryan:** Thank you, Mr Coe. We have made a written submission. You possibly already understand the coverage of our union. All the members have been heavily hit by COVID in hospitality and at the airport, and we also have a representative from one of the massage therapy shops. It is one of those small workplaces where people have been heavily hit by COVID. I do not want to say much more, knowing the constraints of time, but I urge you to look at our submission when you have an opportunity.

The group of workers with us today, as you would appreciate, represents thousands of workers who have been negatively impacted. Sometimes the individuals in this room feel that they are fortunate in some ways because of their personal circumstances, but their stories are actually very compelling. We can always look to someone who is worse off than ourselves, but what has happened to them has had a very significant impact on their lives. They now will have been out of work for six weeks.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Ryan. With regard to the levels of unemployment and underemployment, how bad is it in the ACT, especially in the hospitality sector and in the areas covered by the union?

**Ms Ryan:** I do not have any particular figures with me but, as an indicator, the jobs for Canberra program attracted over 3,000 applications within the first 48 hours of its operation. That will give you an idea of the demand.

Before we get to the questions, each of the people with me today prepared a very short opening statement. It would be lovely to hear from them and less from me. If that would be okay, I would like to turn to Nishan Upasena so that he can tell you from his perspective as an airport worker.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr Upasena:** I am working as an aviation security officer at the Canberra Airport. I have been stood down for eight weeks. We had 90 employees. All of them are not

eligible for the JobKeeper or even the JobSeeker and we are in a very bad situation. The company is not looking after us; even the government is not looking after us. That is my grievance.

**Mr Singh:** I am an aviation security officer at Canberra Airport. I agree with Nishan Upasena. We start work early in the morning and finish late at night. People in the industry are not looking after us. It is a very bad situation: sitting at home since eight weeks ago. Please do something.

**Ms Paquibot:** I am a massage therapist here in Canberra. I am a single mother. It is going to be a very difficult situation for me because, as a single mother, I also need to be able to support my family in the Philippines. So it is hard for me at this moment.

**Ms Clarke:** I was a hotel receptionist. I was laid off in late March. I had one day of notice before I no longer had a source of income. I am also a full-time master's student, so even before COVID I was only able to work about two shifts a week, so I did not have savings to fall back on and in order to pay my expenses I had to accumulate quite a lot of credit card debt so that I could afford bills.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thank you all for appearing today. It is obviously incredibly distressing knowing that there are some people who are still being left behind, despite all of the efforts both federally and at the ACT level. Ms Ryan, on behalf of others, what one thing would make the most material difference right now that has not yet been done but is reasonably easy to do?

**Ms Ryan:** A range of things have been very helpful to people who are on visas, such as access to health care. There have been a range of measures. If there is one thing more that could be done, it is more jobs. The jobs for Canberra program is really good. It is working well. People will be getting into employment quickly. The sooner—obviously considering safety obligations and obligations to the public generally—we can get people in jobs the better it is for everybody, not just in terms of the income but because of people's mental health. It is very hard to be sitting at home for weeks on end, not knowing when it is going to end. Also, once our members have some money in their pockets they will be able to spend money on services that will help other businesses. So even though it might be difficult to find the money now, it is actually an investment in everyone's future.

**MS CHEYNE:** Has the jobs for Canberrans program been easy to engage with?

**Ms Ryan:** Yes, it has from my perspective. We spoke to Veronica this morning. She said there was some difficulty in actually logging on and filling in the applications. They have tried to streamline that process, but there was some difficulty for people who are often unfamiliar with those sorts of systems. I am pleased to report that Veronica has got an interview on Wednesday and is very likely to obtain employment through that program. So more of that, please.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** We have heard a lot about the issues that people are having in keeping accommodation. I imagine that many of your members are tenants. Have you any feedback about how they are finding maintaining a tenancy without, presumably, the income they had before?

**Ms Ryan:** One of the issues with that is that the level of hidden poverty is a big problem—and I know that you have spoken about it in the past—even for people who are in work. International students of course have the cap at 20 hours a week, which always makes life very difficult for them at the best of times.

One of the hard issues which have not been highlighted yet is that we find families live cheek-by-jowl in accommodation in Canberra. We will have three families living in a two-bedroom unit and so on. When some of those workers are essential workers, working on the front line, either in hospital cleaning or in schools or childcare centres, that poses an additional risk. That is because of the underlying affordability problems that we have always had.

Some of our members, fortunately, are in public housing—quite a number, actually. That is great. But it is also a bit of a commentary on the overall system that people who are in work need the social safety net of public housing to the extent that our members do. It just highlights the fact that we had slow wage growth and inequity existing in the system before this problem happened. This problem has happened and exacerbates all those issues.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Do you think that the things the ACT government has done in the short run, with stopping evictions and potentially rental decreases, are going to help your members and ensure that they can remain in housing, or is it not enough?

**Ms Ryan:** It is a really important short-term measure. Of course, we have to look at other things in the long term. The more secure employment we can bring to the community post the epidemic and rebuild the economy in a way that stops inequity, the better position we will be in in the longer term in relation to housing. But, in the short term, being able to give that reassurance to people has been important.

**Ms Clarke:** I have been quite fortunate in my relationship with my landlord, but I know that a lot of my colleagues have been really struggling and, despite the eviction freezes, have been pressured quite a lot. So, yes, keep going with keeping those protections in place.

**MRS DUNNE:** You have outlined in your submission the sorts of problems and some practical solutions you see that we have not already addressed. We have talked about jobs for Canberra, which does fill a gap. But are there other things that we have missed so far?

**Ms Ryan:** Making sure that they are well understood—making sure that people understand what benefits are available to them. There are particular barriers for people from non-English-speaking backgrounds to access services. So we should do as much as we can do to target information campaigns about what is available and make them streamlined to get access. For example, what could happen is that in the jobs for Canberra program we will put people in a lot of contact through the interview and employment process—questions about what further training those people might like when they are in the program, checking on their welfare and their families' welfare, because they have already become, for a short term, public servant employees. So you will be in contact with a cohort of people that is regularly not in contact with

government. That might give an opportunity for people to get the word out further about what assistance is already currently available.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Has the United Workers Union come across any local instances of employers exploiting the JobKeeper subsidy?

**Ms Ryan:** Not yet, but it is a very complicated program to give anyone advice on. A local example is that I am working with a member at the moment who is working, including overtime, as a cleaner at the Canberra Centre, 50 hours a week. As the Canberra Centre reduced its services, and particularly when their food courts closed for anything other than takeaway, his hours were cut, as a result of the downturn in trade, to about 20 hours a week. It was a big cut for him. It prevents you from qualifying for JobSeeker, but the employer had to wait for quite a while before they knew whether they were going to qualify for JobKeeper. He is a permanent resident, so he did not have that issue.

But when he goes back, that \$1,500 is still quite a lot less than what he was earning as a full-time employee with some overtime. He will not necessarily show up in any figures anywhere. He is employed; he is getting the JobKeeper. People will think he is all right, but actually he is not. It is very complicated, when the messaging has generally been, “Here’s a safety net; we’ll look after you,” to go back to someone and say, “You’ve had this big drop in income”—and cleaners’ wages are not high—“and your family is still feeling the pressure but the only thing that’s going to save that situation is when we come out of the isolation stage and the work picks up.” It is complicated.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Ms Ryan, and all the witnesses who are here today. We very much appreciate hearing your stories and putting a human face to the situation that is before us. A copy of the transcript will be sent through. Please check that it is accurate and please keep us informed about progress as we move through the coming months.

**MARSHALL, DR DAVID**, Chair, Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum and Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Advisory Forum

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome to this hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. Dr Marshall, I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the implications of the statement?

**Dr Marshall:** I do.

**THE CHAIR:** Before we ask questions, do you have a brief opening statement that you would like to give?

**Dr Marshall:** I have some initial comments. From a tourism point of view and certainly for the hospitality industry, as you have heard from Mr Brierley, this is the most devastating thing that has happened to tourism in Australia's history. Certainly, Canberra has been impacted dramatically as a result of this, as have other parts of the Australian tourism, hospitality, sports and arts sectors.

We are estimating that 95 per cent of people in those sectors in the ACT have been impacted in some shape or form. We know that there are 9,000 businesses in the ACT which have applied for JobKeeper and many of those are in the sectors I have just outlined. So it is a very serious issue. Some of the organisations have not been able to apply for JobKeeper because the casual workforce that they have been employing have not been with them for 12 months. So there have been some anomalies in that system as well, which has been very disappointing in that respect.

I would like to make a comment regarding the government. The ACT Chief Minister and Dr Kerry Coleman have, I think, done an outstanding job in managing this. We are in a very strong position in the ACT, and that bodes very well for tourism's recovery. I was just listening to the Prime Minister's announcement of the first stage, where interstate travel has been relaxed to some extent. A number of people are now able to go to restaurants and cafes. So there is this lifting, which may assist some of our operators in the ACT.

**THE CHAIR:** With regard to the opportunities for domestic tourism in the coming months, and years potentially, how can the ACT position itself to take full advantage of more domestic recreational travelers?

**Dr Marshall:** We are in a very fortunate position in the ACT because 90 per cent of our visits are domestic anyway, and 66 per cent of visitors to the ACT are from Sydney and regional New South Wales.

I think the challenge for tourism around Australia is the propensity for people to want to travel. A survey released just last week by the ABC indicated that only 20 per cent of people would be comfortable flying. Only 40 per cent of people would be comfortable going to a restaurant at this particular stage. So when you start thinking about these statistics, you understand that there is a reluctance for people to suddenly jump out and start life again as normal.

From the ACT's perspective, we are a drive market. We have 5½ million people on our doorstep. We are a very good short-break destination. We have wide open spaces. We are not crowded. The access to the city is remarkable from right around the region itself. We have excellent accommodation choices. When you add all these things together, the marketing which VisitCanberra are already discussing and planning will target that very market interested in those particular criteria. So I think we are in a very strong position.

**MS CHEYNE:** Is it reasonable for us in this climate to start to set targets for numbers of tourists that we would like to see in the ACT, or tourism spending in the ACT—perhaps just in a staggered way? If so, what do you think would be a reasonable target to be setting in the short and the medium terms?

**Dr Marshall:** It is a very good question. I do not believe that we would be in a position at this stage to make estimates, mainly because we do not know the travel commitments that people are making. It is quite interesting. I was on a Tourism Australia webinar this morning and they were saying to the industry, “Encourage people to forget their overseas bucket list and start thinking about their domestic to-do list.” I think that that is a really good summation of where we are now at.

We understand that domestic travel will be at the forefront for Australians probably for the next 12 months. It is very difficult to see when borders will be open, except New Zealand. That is very encouraging for us because New Zealanders are coming to Australia—1.3 million of them—and many of them come to Canberra as well. So there are glimmers of hope.

The main thing with the opening of restaurants and cafes and attractions and so forth is whether it is viable for them to do so. I think Anthony from the AHA commented before that 25 per cent of people filling a restaurant is not going to pay the bills. It is the same with hotels. So it is a decision which is going to have to be made by the operators themselves.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Dr Marshall, you noted that 90 per cent of our tourism is domestic and that it will be a long time, if ever, before we have the same level of international travel as before. What changes do you think that is going to mean long term for the tourist industry, particularly in the ACT?

**Dr Marshall:** It is interesting. China is our major source market of international visitors, but really we were so reliant on the domestic market. The implication, though, for internationals is international students. The ANU and UC and, to a lesser extent, CIT have all been hit with the restrictions on students coming into Australia from overseas, as universities have been around Australia. So it is certainly going to have an impact. It is going to be hard for the domestic tourism numbers to make up for the 270,000 international visitors we receive every year, mainly because they spend a lot of money—internationals more than domestic. That is one of those things.

I think the nature of how people view touring over the next six to 12 months will be an indicator of how quickly the tourism industry will recover as a whole. So it is very much up in the air. We have never been through anything before like this, so a lot of it

at this stage is almost guesswork in some respects as to how it might unfold.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** Is the industry looking at planning for a potential new future that has less travel, particularly international travel, given everything that everyone is saying?

**Dr Marshall:** The whole industry is going to change. A lot of businesses will as well. It is interesting. People have been talking about the fact that restaurants and cafes and so forth have been operating very independently in regard to takeaway foods and ordering through Uber and all these sorts of things but, quite frankly, they are not making money. The only way that the sector, including retail, is going to make money is when people start to loosen their purse strings, when they come out and start to entertain and to travel. That is the only way, because the industry is struggling.

The arts community, for example, has been absolutely devastated by this particular pandemic, to the point where there are tens of thousands of people in that community who have lost their jobs, and they may never return in many cases. The impact is slowly starting to emerge but is very difficult to estimate. We know how many people are on JobSeeker. But a lot of these young people, particularly the 20 to 29-year-olds, who have been impacted probably more than any other age group in tourism, are going to take a long while, perhaps, to settle back into the opportunities which tourism may present.

**MRS DUNNE:** On the upside, are there opportunities for destinations like Canberra in the clean, wide-open spaces sense? In a time of uncertainty, when people probably want to get out but are unsure where to get out, could we actually have a marketing opportunity?

**Dr Marshall:** Absolutely. Certainly the region—even the secondary markets of Melbourne, for example, and Victoria—are still within driving distance. I think it is going to be very critical for people to start thinking about how they can enjoy Australia and visit places they never thought they would. I am sure there are a lot of people who have not been to Canberra for many years who might suddenly decide, “You know, why don’t we give it a shot?”

We have lost the schools market here. A hundred and sixty thousand students come every year, as you are probably well aware. That has gone. We have lost them. The business events and convention market—I know that Michael Matthews will be explaining this to you later. There are opportunities for us from the domestic tourism point of view, I think, to grow that market—probably more so than an area like North Queensland, which is reliant virtually solely on commercial flights. If people are reluctant to fly or if the airlines are not able to offer the airfares which are necessary to make them viable, then Canberra is in a very good position.

**MRS DUNNE:** Have you been making representations to the government and to other tourism operations about how you might market us in this environment? Is this part of the agenda?

**Dr Marshall:** Yes. Regarding the Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum, Jonathan Kobus, as director of VisitCanberra, is on our board and we have had lots of

discussions with him about the budgets which might be required. Tourism Australia, who normally focus on international markets, have now been charged by Minister Birmingham to look at the domestic market and stimulating domestic visits. We know that VisitCanberra is working very closely with Tourism Australia. The governments have the financial will to invest in marketing, understanding that it is going to be very competitive. I think we are well placed in the planning which is going ahead. I am very encouraged by what VisitCanberra have outlined as far as their strategy is concerned.

**MRS DUNNE:** Are you saying that we know exactly where the hell they are and they are in Sydney and Melbourne and the region and they can drive to us?

**Dr Marshall:** That is the number one priority for us, absolutely. Again, you can do that without the massive expense of trying to mass market, because we know who our target audiences are; we know where they live. Canberra is well positioned, I think, to take advantage of the geographical position we are in, in the middle of New South Wales.

**MRS DUNNE:** You got the ScoMo reference?

**THE CHAIR:** The Lara Bingle reference?

**Dr Marshall:** I get all my advice from Barnaby Joyce. But I have downloaded the app, so I am doing my part.

**MR PETTERSSON:** You have talked about the ACT's strength and the potential campaign that is going to get rolled out to spruik the ACT. Do you know what other jurisdictions and other cities are planning to say about themselves, to spruik themselves, to get tourists coming to their cities, and how their offering would compare to what the ACT is putting forward?

**Dr Marshall:** North Queensland have announced that they will be targeting the high-yield traveller: those people who would normally go overseas and perhaps have not been to the islands—Hayman, Hamilton or whatever. That is going to be their focus. That is quite a narrow focus, but that is certainly part of what northern Queensland are planning. New South Wales have a very good campaign: "I love New South Wales". They will roll that out again. They have a vast range of products available. This is going to be the challenge: to differentiate yourself from every other market. But I think what I have described before about the advantages of Canberra, particularly with the drive market, gives us the edge perhaps over South Australia or certainly Perth and Tasmania.

I think every state is going to benefit as a result of the focus for the next 12 months on a very heavily marketed domestic environment. We have some fabulous attractions in Australia, and many Australians have not seen as much of Australia as they probably have of Europe. So I think the change of emphasis will be very good for our industry. We certainly hope it works.

**THE CHAIR:** How can we better work with the immediate region to package a holiday in Canberra as being more than just the city of Canberra but also drawing on

the benefits of the wineries et cetera?

**Dr Marshall:** We work closely with Destination Southern NSW. Because the drive market will be a key to our success, we will be working with Victoria, out of Melbourne, and out of Sydney through regional New South Wales into Canberra. There was at one stage a heavily promoted “kangaroo route”. You used to fly in to Sydney and then drive through Canberra down to Melbourne. That was targeted to the international market. They are the sorts of initiatives we will look at.

I think in the shorter term people will be keen to do short breaks and it will start to grow. They will start to gain their confidence in being able to travel and feel safe in travelling. That is of paramount importance when you start thinking about what people want to hear from a marketing campaign. So safety, ease of access, reasonable accommodation, free activities—we have a lot of these in Canberra. All those things add up to what could be packaged to be very successful strategy for the ACT.

**THE CHAIR:** Very good. Thank you very much, Dr Marshall, for providing some optimism about the way forward for the territory.

**Dr Marshall:** A pleasure. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** You will be provided with a transcript of this hearing. Please check that to make sure it is accurate, and please keep us updated with any thoughts that you or the industry have over the coming months.

**MATTHEWS, MR MICHAEL**, Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Convention Bureau

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome, Mr Matthews. Thank you for joining us today. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the implications of that statement?

**Mr Matthews:** I do.

**THE CHAIR:** Would you like to start off with an opening statement?

**Mr Matthews:** Thanks for including the bureau. My interest is business events. I have spoken with some of you at different times about what we do. The bureau has been around since 1982. We are a membership organisation that is funded by the ACT government through VisitCanberra. We represent about 140 members in Canberra. We are charged with bringing business events here over the next many years.

We have been severely impacted by COVID-19. It has been incredibly frustrating to see the millions of dollars we contribute to the economy not being able to happen in 2020. More difficult, though, is the members and the experiences they have had to endure. It is everything from total loss of business to limited and non-profitable business to laying off staff. There is a bright side, and I can get to that later.

The bureau focuses primarily on domestic business events and increasingly on international business events. What we have seen of late has been everything up until November cancelled. We have been tracking that business across the whole supply chain. Those 140 members are from larger members, like convention centres and hotels, to smaller businesses and sole operators. We have been tracking the impact of that and it is in the millions of dollars.

**MS CHEYNE:** I am interested in the bright side that you just said there might be, because it sounds really dire.

**Mr Matthews:** It has been dire. If there is a bright side—all the difficult decisions were made five or six weeks ago and it is in a holding pattern. A lot of businesses have been very successful to this point and there is some optimism that they will be there at the end of it. So that is a small win. Other small wins are that, just last week, we were able to rebook three international business events, between 350 and 500 people, into future years. They will not be happening in 2020 or 2021; they have moved.

There is a whole domino effect around Australia and also around the world. We have been impacted. We have events that would have happened that cannot because we have been bumped further down in the years. But it has worked to our advantage as well and other destinations have been bumped.

Our members, the Convention Centre, the hotels and us, have worked really hard to make sure that events do not cancel and rebook. The bright side is that from 2020, which is a complete disaster, 2021 should be fairly strong from a business events

perspective. But there is a lot of uncertainty there still. We do not know when borders will open up definitely. We heard some news just now from the Prime Minister. We do not know when international borders will open up, we do not know how we will fare in winter and we do not know how the businesses will be able to accommodate those demands.

The bright side for 2021 is that we are already at capacity for business events during peak periods in Canberra. We have been at capacity for a number of years during peak periods. What our businesses have done really well is try to squeeze that business into 2021, just to help make those events happen. The business events we primarily do here in Canberra are associations. If associations are unable to meet, that is their major revenue stream throughout the year to fund operations. So there is a real interest for those associations to meet. It has been really difficult for them as well. There will be some associations that will not survive this period.

**MS CHEYNE:** What are your members doing? It is great news to hear that the sector is looking reasonably strong for 2021, and it seems like there is an amount of very smart and very good effort in making that happen. But for all of those members whose focus—and their employees’—is on event management and large event management, what are they doing day to day? Has there been any pivoting in the business model for 2020 or is it just that people have been stood down?

**Mr Matthews:** You used the pivot word. It is a popular word. The pivoting has been mostly around what you can do to make the best of a terrible situation. A lot of the work might be takeaways or offering different services. Some of the hotels are offering their rooms as office space; there have been some health response rooms. The rate is not there; the volume is not there. It enables them to keep the lights on or employ a few staff, but most of the businesses have had to stand down their employees.

There are a lot of examples where businesses are on reduced hours but everybody is doing more. It is interesting that a lot of the businesses that have stood their people down are starting to think about bringing some back, from a sales perspective. But until very recently there has been nobody selling their businesses. That is what we do anyway, but some of the responsibility the bureau has taken on is to make sure we stay in touch with our clients and keep the stream and pipeline of business coming into Canberra for future years.

Everything the businesses have done—some of them are closed and have made plans to stay closed for as long as 12 months. Others have remortgaged their houses to keep their businesses afloat. We are quite fortunate in that we have got a really small, engaged community here. I would not say they are all owner-operated, but you know who to reach out to, who owns the business here. There is no corporate wall. These are real people who are trying to do the best by their employees and make sure the business is there at the end.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** When you said “sell the business”, were you talking about selling the operating business because the person did not want to run it anymore, or selling the business to customers? I was not quite sure.

**Mr Matthews:** Was that in relation to us as a sales and marketing organisation? We are selling the destination to meeting planners for future business. So we are selling on behalf of those businesses.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** I understand it now. We are having a public hearing using Zoom. A month ago the Assembly had never done that. We must be typical of many organisations. How do you see the growth of online meetings impacting on your business?

**Mr Matthews:** We anticipate delegate numbers to be down for the meetings that go ahead. A lot will have to do with the social distancing and the capability of those spaces. If a ballroom at a hotel can do 300 people, they might only be able to accept 100. So there are limitations there. The other part of it is the safety and security aspect.

I am on the Business Events Council of Australia safety and hygiene committee. We are forwarding, through that national group, to the minister's office to make sure that, when mass gatherings are considered again, not all mass gathering are created equally. Business events can be—we know the audience. We can welcome them. We can pre-vet them. We can screen them. We can know their travel plans and we can manage their activities. And there are peers in a room, so you do not tend to have people embarrassing themselves and doing whatever they want. They follow the rules. So we are working really hard for the understanding that business events are not your typical mass gatherings and probably could meet more safely.

To answer your question, hybrid meetings will be a thing but they are not very satisfying. I think you will see corporations adopt it because there are travel savings there from the millions they spend in travel. The technology exists and people are using it. But I think that as soon as things free up and people can meet face to face and that social engagement is seen to be more productive, we will go back to some normalisation. Everything from previous things that have gone on around the world suggests that there is a modification of behavior until a certain point and then there is some normalisation.

But out of this we fully expect that, from a safety and hygiene perspective, the expectations of the consumer will be elevated. People will be choosing safe destinations. They will want to make sure the venues they go to are clean, spotless, safety conscious and all those things. Canberra has a real advantage there. When we target internationals and we bring them here, some of the things they say to us are that there are clean, open spaces, that you can see the night sky and that it feels more open and park-like and less congested. So Canberra has a distinct advantage over some other bigger cities but, that said, there will be other more natural settings that might also be popular.

**MRS DUNNE:** You have led seamlessly to where I wanted to go, which was the advantages that Canberra and Australia may have as we come out of this and that Australia's performance in terms of flattening the curve will probably stand us in good stead. Added to that are the facilities that are available in Canberra and the Canberra environment. Do you see that as a marketing plus for the rebuilding of the industry?

**Mr Matthews:** There are two parts to that. I think there is an Australian opportunity to tell the story on the health response, assuming we come out of winter in good stead.

**MRS DUNNE:** Presuming, yes.

**Mr Matthews:** There are going to be a lot of no-go areas around the world where Australia could do quite well: Taiwan, New Zealand, Australia. I cannot think of any others. Parts of Asia will rebound, but North America and Europe will not be what they were for the foreseeable short term, medium term. Australia could do really well and Canberra could do really well as well, so long as we get through this sensibly and we do not see other spikes.

Our businesses want to open up, but there is a balance here. We do not want to open up and undo all the good work that has been done. We want to open up, but if people do not feel safe they are not going to come. The viability and profitability waiver is expensive in Australia. If you are opening up for 20 per cent of what it takes to keep the lights on, it does not make any sense. There is going to be a fine balance between doing this gradually and safely. We balance that.

We would like to see gatherings of a certain number for business events, but we think we can manage those quite safely within the restrictions that will be imposed on us. As I said, we could temperature check every arrival through the Convention Centre, possibly. We could have triage medical staff on. We could make sure that there is a cleaning regime that adopts the best science around the characteristics of the virus. There are lots of things that tourism can do in general but lots of things business events could definitely do, and in a controlled environment.

**MRS DUNNE:** But, to do that, how much and what sort of assistance do you need from government, or is it something that you would take on yourselves?

**Mr Matthews:** What do the businesses need? The Convention Bureau is not the Convention Centre. We are an extension of their sales and marketing efforts. That is primarily our function. That sales effort will have a marketing role to ensure that our destination, our businesses, are safe to visit.

We do not know what the minimum requirements will be that will be imposed by the ACT government on us. But there needs to be something there to reassure the traveller. What the airport have done with their screening is primarily there to offer reassurance to the traveller that they are doing everything they can. You are not going to catch everybody, but you are going to catch those outliers that you do not want to be sitting next to on a plane. I do not know what those costs are.

I think there is a need for industry to be looking after themselves—they have always done a great job of that here in Canberra—and they will want to do that. That will be a new normal that they will adopt. There will be hand sanitisers at every entrance to every public building. They will probably absorb that cost. But if there was something at larger venues like the Arboretum or the Convention Centre—if it was imposed that they needed temperature checks—there are staffing implications and infrastructure costs. I am not sure who would bear that cost, but we will see what is imposed on us.

The industry will do it because they want to welcome that business back. It is a really important business. Because of the long lead time, businesses can look at that and plan their year around it and their revenue strategies and their reinvestment, all those things.

**MR PETTERSSON:** I note some of the recent screwdriver-ready projects like the repainting of the Convention Centre. Are there any other projects that the ACT government could be investing in right now that will help the industry get going again when they can?

**Mr Matthews:** The Convention Centre is an ACT government asset, which is different from a lot of the other businesses. EPIC, the Arboretum, those sorts of things, are all popular venues, but most are private organisations—Realm, Pialligo, Hyatt, QT, all that sort of thing. I am not sure what the government's role is in that.

I think if we are going to reinforce that we are in the clean and clear business now—Canberra as an organised, visually pleasing, clean looking place already—that is where our ACT government can reinforce that. It is simple stuff. When visitors start to roll through, the grass is green right now and the verges are cut and there is no graffiti around. Graffiti has nothing to do with the virus, but graffiti looks dirty. It is that sense of a total package to make sure that people can buy into that Canberra is clean and clear. It is a small thing, but I think it reinforces that safety element. I do not know if you guys are aware of the broken window strategy from New York back in the 1980s, but it is worth having a look at. You see something, you fix it.

**THE CHAIR:** A final question from me: with regard to the bureau's resources, especially going into 2021 and noting there will be a lot of other parochial states and regions that are going to be fighting hard for convention dollars, do you have the resources that you need to put up competitive bids?

**Mr Matthews:** Yes. At the last election we received a boost in funding that helped us to maintain costs and remain competitive in the domestic market. We did some internal allocation to pursue international. We are going to back away from the international a little. Once the universities find their feet, we will be targeting academics and their international communities, but that is going to be put on the backburner a little.

We do really well domestically. The problem for us, the risk for us, is that a lot of those bigger destinations that have been solely focused on international are also going to be looking at domestic business. When you see the bigger convention centres around the country targeting smaller meetings and the bigger bureaus around the country targeting things that we traditionally do really well at, that is a real risk for us.

If we get off the rotation on a domestic event—what I mean is, if we lose it—we do not get another opportunity for that business event for maybe five years. And internationally it is like 15, 20 years often. If we lose it, we lose business certainty down the road, which creates this void.

The answer to your question is: we are the only destination in Australia without a host bid fund and I think it is important for us. It is certainly not about buying business,

although the investment in the bureau right now is about 50 to one in terms of our return. We delivered \$56 million into the economy last year. The total benefit of business events in the ACT from the EY report is over \$900 million.

But we only track the things we touch. There is flow-on from our trade show and sales activity that goes directly to members that we do not count. Without a bid fund, I think we probably would be at a bit of a disadvantage for those other destinations around Australia who are targeting what we are good at.

The reason why business events are good is obviously the heads and beds, the economic returns. It is the vibrancy in the precinct, the restaurants and all that stuff, right through the supply chain—audiovisual to wineries, you name it. But it is actually a platform to showcase the things that we are good at here in Canberra: artificial intelligence, bioscience, engineering, medical, health, social services, space, defence. All those are business events that we have, and every one of those is a platform to show off Canberra to Australia and, increasingly, the world. But that will be for another day.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much for joining us today and for providing some insights into the outlook, as well as the current experience. As those strategies for 2020-21 and later years are developed, please keep us posted.

**Mr Matthews:** That is great. Thank you, I appreciate the time. And if there are any follow-up questions, you can contact me at any time.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**DALE, DR NAOMI**, President, National Capital Attractions Association

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you for joining us today for the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm that you have received that privilege statement and say for the record that you understand the implications of that document?

**Dr Dale:** Yes, I have received that and I understand the implications.

**THE CHAIR:** Would you like to give a brief opening statement on behalf of the National Capital Attractions Association or should we go straight into questions?

**Dr Dale:** I will very briefly let you know that the National Capital Attractions Association represents not only our national attractions federally and privately funded but also events and other tourism businesses. We have quite a broad range there around our membership. Within the National Capital Attractions Association sits the national capital educational tourism project, which, as you know, works to bring schools to Canberra. We also manage the Canberra region tourism awards, which celebrate excellence in tourism. Also, as the Canberra region Tourism Industry Council, we accredit quality tourism businesses. I guess we wear many hats underneath the NCAA.

**THE CHAIR:** Would you please provide an insight into the impact that the restrictions have had on the national institutions but also, of course, the private lessees in those national institutions?

**Dr Dale:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** And also the private attractions?

**Dr Dale:** Sure. Obviously the divide between federally and privately managed makes a little bit of a difference with regard to how these attractions are managing. JobKeeper kicked in yesterday, and that has made a huge difference, certainly for our private attractions, with regard to maintaining staff whilst they are in this kind of mothball state. From what I can gather, they are using the time very productively to make some innovations and changes with regard to their attractions. Some of them are small changes and some of them are just sort of keeping an eye on the future.

Obviously, in this extremely difficult time, when we are talking about tourism, even with just local restrictions as well, we are really excited and looking forward to things as they progress. But, obviously, we are very aware that that needs to be done sensibly and that they are looking to just be ready to go as soon as that happens.

With our larger institutions that are federally managed it is a little more complicated because we have been sitting within different portfolios, and even if federally there is a decision made around freedom of travel and things like that, interstate and possibly even across to New Zealand at some point in time, the difficulty for us will be around managing that cohesively and making sure that we are, as a tourism destination,

offering something that is cohesive and collaborative, rather than each place doing something a little differently.

Certainly, within those attractions themselves, things like the cafes, restaurants, gift shops and so on are having to handle things very differently. Food providers are not able to do anything at all, obviously, but we are hearing some very interesting stories about some innovations for things like the gift shop and so on. Suddenly, lots of people want to buy puzzles, funnily enough. Places like Questacon, for example, are selling a lot of science kits and things for families who are distance schooling their children.

**THE CHAIR:** What support have the tenants been provided by the federal government, to the institutions, throughout this period?

**Dr Dale:** The tenants are taking advantage of the things that would be located outside that, with regard to JobKeeper and things like that. I guess there is an opportunity to maintain staff whilst they are effectively mothballed. But a lot of those things are happening within the bubble, I guess, of federally funded.

Sometimes, depending on what the leasing arrangements are, it is a little murky with regard to how people are managing in that space. Probably one of the most difficult parts is to draw that line between a tourism business versus a federal, national institution that is curating, a collectors' sort of institution. It has very different KPIs and requirements. Whilst those are not top of mind, it is very difficult to manage for those people because they are almost a sideshow to those institutions, yes.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thank you for appearing today. With the school excursions, that has obviously had an enormous impact as well. How are the links being maintained between our national institutions and the schools?

**Dr Dale:** That is a really important point. As you have probably seen in recent articles, we understand that, already, about 60,000 kids have had to have their excursion cancelled. Most of them are postponing. The big issue is going to be that, hopefully, when those schools postpone, they try to come in perhaps terms 3 and 4, once it is deemed safe for them to do so. We are going to have some real issues with capacity not just with regard to accommodation but for them to be able fit into the programs. We have fantastic education programs that we offer at these institutions.

Obviously, we already have bookings for that time of year and we already are starting to work quite closely with a lot of major attractions around perhaps extended opening hours or even being available on weekends so that we can actually facilitate for those kids that have postponed rather than cancelled.

This is even an opportunity for us from a tourism perspective, perhaps, eventually. New Zealand takes a lot of overseas school excursions. Perhaps they could be coming to us instead. There is a lot of opportunity there, but we are going to have some problems, I guess, around capacity: how are we going to fit these extra kids in and how are we going to work together to make sure that they still have the fantastic experience they would normally have had at this time of year.

**MS CHEYNE:** And what is the answer? Very obviously there are going to be problems in terms of just fitting people in around what is already such a high capacity for those bookings in terms 3 and 4.

**Dr Dale:** Yes.

**MS CHEYNE:** Could it be scheduling things at different times and on weekends and things like that?

**Dr Dale:** I think making more programs available and, possibly, depending on the conditions for groups gathering in these institutions, whether or not we could actually expand sizes of groups. Places like the electoral education office and so on have quite restrictive numbers of students that they permit in a group. That is obviously for a quality of experience. Possibly, at this point in time, we might need to consider slightly larger groups, if that is going to be permissible and safe. It could be to do with the group size—certainly with regard to programs being offered outside what we would consider standard 9 to 5, for want of a better term, public service hours that we currently offer at a lot of these institutions but also hopefully offering something on the weekend. Possibly this is something we could be doing with Canberra schools initially, before we look to expanding that to ones that are travelling from within Australia.

It is going to be a bit of a prickly subject, but I think the resources to go behind that are really important around making sure that those students still have access, because we understand that the impact of that visit is an ongoing one and a really important one for those students and also the teachers—for them to be able to access our national institutions.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** It was really interesting to hear how well you are planning for terms 3 and 4, which led me to think: what will be the impact on you and your members if there is a second wave? We look like we are opening up a bit, and hopefully it will all go well, but!

**Dr Dale:** Because it is day to day, it is extremely difficult to plan. Obviously, people want certainty and surety, specifically for visitors, that things are going to be safe. And obviously we are perceived as a safe destination at the best of times. We have had some really terrific news about the great management of restrictions currently. I think there are some people who are a little nervous about what happens if it is a free-for-all. I think we need to be quite cautious around that.

There are a lot of things happening with regard to staying in touch with our current customers, visitors, schools, and things around creating some digital collateral, digital virtual tours, some online learning and things like that. I think a lot of people are taking the opportunity to create an experience that people can access from afar. I have had some really terrific conversations with, in particular, accessibility groups around maintaining that leap but also that collateral so that we can actually continue to offer the attractions in an accessible way to schools that cannot make it or even visitors that are not physically able to travel through them as comfortably.

There is work happening in many spaces. For example, the Museum of Australian

Democracy has, for at least 18 months now, been offering a virtual classroom experience. There are others that are using this time to be innovative in that space too. Whilst we are excited about the idea and we do have plans for terms 3 and 4, if that is not possible—and of course it is understandable if it is not—then there are other ways for us to contact and reach out.

As part of the National Capital Attractions Association we have developed a COVID-19 recovery module for tourism businesses, and this is available from this week. We are actually offering it for free to tourism businesses in the Canberra region. Businesses will be able to go through—based on their finances, their current staffing and training—as restrictions ease, what they plan to do but also what they can be doing whilst they are effectively mothballed as well.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** You talked about other ways that people might access the national attractions, other ways of making them accessible. Is there a possibility that you will be so successful with that that we will have fewer people coming to physically visit Canberra?

**Dr Dale:** That is something that certainly is always at the front of everyone's mind, and we have talked about it several times. I was fortunate enough to spend some time at the Smithsonian in Washington DC on a fellowship quite recently and had conversations with their national institutions that there is a concern that if things are available online people just will not bother to come. But that is not the case we find at all.

In fact, offering schools and visitors something that whets their appetite a little around what they can engage with here is a really effective marketing tool because people see it online and decide they want to go and see it in person. In particular, for school groups, the teachers say what an incredible difference it makes to bring the students in to see democracy in action and all these other wonderful places. It really is more of a marketing tool than something that makes people decide they do not need to travel at all.

**MRS DUNNE:** Thank you for appearing today. I want to touch on the way out. A lot of national capital attractions benefit from the big blockbuster. We had a big blockbuster over the last period but they had to close early. What sort of impact will travel restrictions, airline restrictions et cetera have on the big blockbuster that might be the leader out of this?

**Dr Dale:** Obviously, that is really going to depend on restrictions around numbers of people in certain spaces, and we will be led by what is recommended for that. I think that, probably, large gatherings or blockbusters, the large events, are probably off the cards for some time. But the institutions are in a really great position to manage people in parts of their institutions. I think we are actually very well placed to be able to manage safely certain numbers of people with regard to exhibitions, curated objects and things like that. We actually are very well positioned to manage that very effectively.

We have the infrastructure, the staffing and the training available there. What we are going to need to do is make sure that our visitors feel safe and understand that we are

all meeting the correct protocols and so on to be a destination that they feel comfortable travelling to. Those blockbusters might look a little different, but actually the institutions are very well placed to manage those people, albeit in a slightly different way.

**MR PETTERSSON:** There has been a lot of dialogue about attracting visitors from afar. What are the conversations like in trying to engage the local population in engaging with these attractions?

**Dr Dale:** I think that is a really important point, in that we obviously want to be seen as a safe destination but we also want the locals to be welcoming people travelling from afar. We do not want a situation where the locals are nervous about people travelling from other states or even from overseas and being part of our community.

There probably will need be to a bit of effort spent around managing locals' understanding. If things have been relaxed a little, it is because it has been seen to be safe to do so. I think getting locals on board, getting locals to visit the attractions as their first trip out of the house, would be a really terrific way to bring in visitors. The visiting friends and relatives market is a huge market for Canberra anyway and predominantly 90 per cent or so of our visitors are domestic visitors to Canberra. We are really not preaching to the converted as such, but we obviously need locals to be on board with what we are doing around attracting people to Canberra and getting that local spending happening.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much for joining us today and for providing a perspective on behalf of the National Capital Attractions Association. Please keep us informed as we move along this journey. You will be sent a copy of the transcript. Please review that and look out for any minor errors. Again, thank you very much for joining us today.

**Dr Dale:** Pleasure. Thanks so much.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**LANGDON, MR NOEL**, Director and Secretary, Cultural Attractions of Australia Inc

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome to this public hearing of the Select Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic response. Thank you for joining us. I understand that you have been forwarded a copy of the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand that statement and the implications contained therein?

**Mr Langdon:** I have read it and understand it.

**THE CHAIR:** Would you like to provide an opening statement to the committee or should we go straight to questions?

**Mr Langdon:** I will very briefly, for those that do not know me, give a little background. I have spent decades in hospitality and tourism and have owned many restaurants, cafes and hotels in Queensland and have managed some of our largest tourism attractions on the Gold Coast and Cairns. I am a co-founder of the Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum, with David Marshall, and I am a co-founder of Cultural Attractions of Australia.

Just to give you a brief background on Cultural Attractions of Australia, it was formed as a not-for-profit in 2018 to represent 18 of our most iconic cultural attractions nationally and it includes four in Canberra. Parliament House, the War Memorial, the National Gallery and the National Museum are our members. It was officially launched by the federal tourism minister at ATE in Perth last year.

Tourism Australia is our funding partner. It was primarily formed to promote Australia through our cultural institutions internationally. Of course, that focus has somewhat changed, given COVID-19, and we are now focused primarily, with Tourism Australia, on the domestic market. That just gives you a bit of background. I am happy to take questions.

**THE CHAIR:** We have heard a lot about the tough situation that many in the industry are experiencing at the moment. What do you see as the opportunities, looking further afield, be it a month or three months or even six months down the track?

**Mr Langdon:** I see opportunities in two ways, and bear in mind I am representing Cultural Attractions of Australia. I am representing very large venues, not smaller Canberra venues—attractions that, one way or another, have been affected by COVID-19 but which, of course, will come out the other side of this less affected than many of our privately owned commercial venues. We are in a slightly different space.

In terms of opportunity, first can I talk about the opportunity for our Canberra cultural attractions. I think it is very important that we use this COVID-19 opportunity to look at restructuring how our cultural attractions actually operate. I will not go into the detail in this meeting, but I am referring to Ben Morton's report, as chair of the federal parliamentary inquiry into the cultural attractions and the range of findings in that report and the recommendations. Certainly, I have been having discussions with Minister Fletcher's office, Minister Tehan's office and Nola Marino's office on how

we might take the opportunity of implementing some of those findings and recommendations. That is the first thing.

From a cultural attractions perspective, which is pretty important to Canberra—and the reality is that the tourism industry would not exist in its current form without them—they are critical to our future success. But for COVID-19, we probably would have progressed some of those things already. That is on the cultural attractions side and the opportunities to really take advantage of that report. I am particularly interested in that side of it.

From an ACT tourism point of view—and I will not go through the stats because I am sure David Marshall and Jonathan Kobus have already given you that information—the opportunities that I see for Canberra and the ACT are unique. First of all, we are the only capital city in Australia that has the range of cultural institutions and the cultural experiences. No-one else has it. I recall relaying this to the previous federal tourism minister, when he said to me that his focus was primarily on other locations. I said, “I know Cairns and the Barrier Reef very well. We do not have those, but we have something different and we have a completely different experience that those other states and cities don’t have.”

As a comparatively new Canberran and an outsider looking in, I think that Canberra has some extraordinarily unique opportunities in capitalising on those cultural attractions. Having Sydney’s population on our doorstep is a considerable advantage and it is really up to our hotels, our cultural attractions and our other business and certainly VisitCanberra to come together with some very innovative marketing products to go to that market.

It is fair to say that, although we are all friendly at the moment on a national cabinet level, coming out the other end of COVID-19 the competition is going to be extraordinarily fierce. So we have to be ahead of this. We have that extraordinary advantage of having all those cultural attractions within easy walking distance, in one city, on the doorstep of five million people. We really need to take advantage of that and we really need to focus very carefully on not just the cultural attractions but some pretty unique food and beverage and vineyard experiences as well. They, too, are some of the things that we need to incorporate and focus on. Of course, they have all suffered through COVID-19.

Finally, something that the ACT has been trying to work on is the focus on adventure tourism and creating a destination adventure tourism location in Canberra. I liken it a lot to the offering in Queenstown in New Zealand—the opportunities that we have. Again, we have five million people on our doorstep. The biggest single market in Australia is within two hours drive.

We have got to start thinking really strategically from this point. I know Jonathan and his team at VisitCanberra are doing that now. Certainly, we are doing it from a Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum perspective. But we have got to be very clever, very smart and ahead of the pack. That is going to start, certainly, post the national cabinet meeting today. It looks like July is the most likely starting point. We really have to start gearing up and focusing our attention in that way.

**MS CHEYNE:** Thank you for appearing today. Dr Dale was just raising a very important problem. As things begin to open up, we are potentially going to be having a good situation, in some ways, as people will be wanting to go to these attractions in perhaps quite large numbers, both locals and the tourists that we are trying to attract here. What are the challenges for our cultural attractions in managing the numbers of people that will be wanting to physically be there and visiting what is so great within our city?

**Mr Langdon:** It is a really good question. We had a meeting this week with Professor Collignon, who is a specialist microbiologist. He attended our Canberra tourism meeting this week. He sits on the national hygiene security committee and is a direct adviser to the PM. I took away from that meeting couple of things. First of all, social distancing is going to be with us for quite some time, and there is no way we can get around that. The other thing that I took away from that is that droplet transmission is also another critical factor. The professor was suggesting that, for example, in restaurant situations staff might have to wear face shields, for both their own safety and that of their guests.

When we look at the cultural attractions, we are lucky in this respect: the four-square-metre rule is easily applied because they are very large, open spaces. We do not have any issue there. I asked the professor specifically, “Given the social distancing and other measures in place, could we look at proposing a ticketing-time situation?” He said that, yes, that would be a very good idea and one that we could easily implement. Certainly, the cultural attractions members I have spoken to see it as a way of being able to still address those social distancing issues and that the four-square-metre rule is going to be applied for some time.

They are the cold, hard realities. We just have to accept that they are going to be the parameters. I am not even suggesting that they are going to cease in December because the Prime Minister just announced stage 3 as being maybe 100 persons in one space. Certainly, 100 persons in the National Museum is virtually like having nobody there.

The only saving grace in that is that each state and territory government is going to be ultimately responsible for how those numbers and some of those conditions are refined to suit our conditions. I see Canberra and our cultural attractions as being unique in that respect and able to take way more than a hundred persons at any one time. It is for us as an industry to talk to government and work through these things that are practical, while still maintaining the health, hygiene and security measures that we all need to have.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** It was a very interesting comment around 100 people in the National Museum. Will you be campaigning for something based on square metres or based on maybe the National Museum being composed of, as it is, multiple different galleries? With 100 people in the National Museum, I agree with you: you would not see them, virtually.

**Mr Langdon:** No. I am going to be talking to our Cultural Attractions of Australia members. Those 18 members represent 25 million visitors per annum and they are the largest in Australia—everybody from the Sydney Opera House to MONA in

Tasmania and the National Gallery of Victoria. I have got a very good base of membership that I can discuss with and, based on their recommendations, maybe come to the ACT government and say, “This is what we think and this is how we think it could be played out.”

I am conscious of an ability for us to use a ticketing system which will make it easier in terms of timing. I think we all agree that 100 people at the National Gallery or the National Museum or the War Memorial or any of those institutions is nothing, but it is up to us to be able to put that argument forward to government.

**MS LE COUTEUR:** You were talking about the ticketing system. Would you envisage that this would be one where people’s names would be recorded for tracking and tracing purposes?

**Mr Langdon:** There is no reason why it could not be. I know that has been suggested in restaurants and cafes—in restaurant bookings. I do not see that that would be an issue, because all the cultural attractions already have a lot of those facilities in place for the education and tourism market—being able to take names and bookings—and we have a pre-existing booking system that would enable us to undertake that. Certainly, we are talking about very limited numbers compared to what they would normally be able to take in a day.

**MRS DUNNE:** Thank you for your appearance here today. I want to follow on from that. One of the previous witnesses—I think it was from the hospitality area—made the point that not all mass gatherings are the same. And you have reinforced that. You talked about a ticketing system. A lot of the attractions in Canberra are already free. It is not an entry price; it is actually a crowd control measure.

**Mr Langdon:** Correct; that is right.

**MRS DUNNE:** That has been used very effectively in large volume destinations for crowd control so that the visitor experience is better.

**Mr Langdon:** Yes; correct.

**MRS DUNNE:** And would there be a cost? There would be some sort of cost associated with that because the War Memorial, for instance, does not have a ticket system at the moment. They would have to establish something. Have you had a thought about what those costs might be and who would bear them?

**Mr Langdon:** Although they do not have a ticketing system per se, they have a reservation system for their school groups. And, certainly, that reservation for the school groups market could easily be migrated to be the general public. I do not see it as being a significant cost at all, not for any of the attractions, to be honest.

**MRS DUNNE:** The other thing I was interested in was: as a means of kick-starting the local tourist trade again, do you see that the big cultural attractions are essentially the anchor tenants, and what thinking has there been about new exhibitions or new events or something that might lead us out of the isolation?

**Mr Langdon:** Unquestionably, the cultural attractions must be the lead for Canberra's story nationally for that domestic-drive market. Whether it is coming out of Sydney, Victoria or Queensland, the cultural attractions are absolutely key. I know that, certainly, they fit within Jonathan Kobus's strategy for driving that domestic market to Canberra.

It is not necessarily that they have to come up with new blockbusters, because that is going to be very difficult in the current environment, but there are opportunities to work more collaboratively. I think that is the key. Certainly, even in our cultural attraction membership, my members in Canberra see the opportunity to work collaboratively. Rather than promoting just the War Memorial—and they will agree with this—we promote all cultural attractions. It is not: “Come to the War Memorial for the day. It is: “Come to Canberra and see all our cultural attractions over three or four days.” That is what needs to happen. The cultural attractions have to work in a collaborative marketing arrangement. They are the key recommendations in Ben Morton's report—that that needs to happen.

**MR PETTERSSON:** I want to get you to expand further on this collaboration that you keep referring to between the cultural institutions themselves and other tourism agencies. Is that collaboration there, ready to go? Are these existing networks fired up, ready and able to activate these marketing campaigns or do we need to do some work to further facilitate these connections?

**Mr Langdon:** I think it is fair to say we will still have to do some work. That is not to say that there is not a willingness to collaborate. There is, I have no doubt, amongst all the cultural attractions. It is matter of our getting together as a group. Certainly, we would involve VisitCanberra because they are the driving force in the destination.

I guess the collaboration I am talking about, more broadly, is in the recommendations that are within the Morton report on all the cultural attractions. One of the key findings and recommendations—and it is one of the things that I have already been discussing with Mr Fletcher's office and Ms Marino's office—is the ability for our cultural attractions to work as one, not as 13 or 14 different cultural attractions.

That then allows for all the cultural attractions to have even billing when you go to market and it forces us to market Canberra as a destination, first and foremost. You come to Canberra to see everything, not just one thing. Certainly, that has the support of Mat Trinca at the National Museum. I have discussed it with him and likewise with other directors and certainly federally. These are all federal institutions, of course. That is why I am talking federally, because it is important that they are all on the same page.

Certainly, from the discussions I have had—and I know that my colleagues in the Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum have had the same discussions—there is a desire to collaborate and come together to work out a package that is going to be attractive to that drive market.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. It is fitting that we should finish where we started, on structural reform and the opportunities that present there. You will be sent a transcript of today's discussion. Please review that and check that there are no minor

errors. Again, thank you very much for presenting to us today.

**Mr Langdon:** My pleasure. Thank you, chair and committee, for the opportunity.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. That concludes today's hearing. The committee's hearing is therefore adjourned.

**The committee adjourned at 2.30 pm.**