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**THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART,
ON FRIDAY, 24 JUNE 2022**

TASMANIAN GOVERNMENT'S CONTINUING RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Ms MADELIENE OGILVIE, MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, WAS CALLED.
KIM EVANS, SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF STATE GROWTH, **MARK BOWLES,**
DEPUTY SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF STATE GROWTH WERE CALLED, MADE
THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Are we good to go? Welcome. As the Minister for Small Business, I invite you if you wish to make an opening statement in addition to the whole-of-government response that has been provided.

Ms OGILVIE - It is a pleasure to be here. I know what an important committee this is. I will do a short opening statement because I know we only have an hour and there is probably quite a lot that you want to talk about.

I feel like I'm wearing two hats today by way of being able to respond, one is small business and the other one is the science and technology portfolio, because I know you are quite interested in some of the those digital and technology challenges.

We have prepared as much information as we can and I am really happy to share as much as I can with you. By way of an opening statement, I want to recognise, and this has really been brought home to me over the last few days as I've done quite a lot of roundtables with small businesses, I want to again recognise the resilience, determination and effort that all Tasmanians put in during the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis. In particular, our small business owners who didn't do it easy. We did a lot to try to help them, but it certainly left a lasting legacy of both positive things that we can draw from the response but also work that we need to do going forward. I wanted to sketch that out.

The federal and state governments reached out and put quite a lot of effort into funding and sustaining, not just businesses, but businesses in particular, through my portfolio. I am aware that this committee has looked at those matters before, but I did bring the submission we made to your last inquiry as well.

I thought I would keep it brief, and then really turn to you Chair and ask what areas specifically you might be interested in and to see if we can have a bit of a free-flowing conversation.

CHAIR - Thanks, Minister. We are particularly focusing on the time since the decision to reopen the border after we reported on the previous Public Accounts Committee inquiry. I note the measures taken since August 2021 in the submission provided covers several aspects. The opening of the first two rounds of funding under the COVID-19 micro and small business, Border Closure Critical Support Grant Program. We saw 4000 businesses sharing \$73 million in grants.

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I'd like to have more detail about that. The distribution of the businesses geographically, the range of business that were paid and the amounts paid. It was a share of \$73 million, but was it evenly distributed or on what basis was that determined?

Ms OGILVIE - We have had many businesses that were in very different sets of circumstances. A grant program is always one that's done by application so it was up to businesses to come forward and seek that support. We do have to give great credit to those who engaged with it. We do feel that we lead the way as a state with that business support.

I can share with you that on 13 August 2021 the Tasmanian and Australian governments announced a jointly funded \$20 million business support package, and that did help businesses with the ongoing impacts of those border closures, and losing our external markets particularly in tourism. We did have feedback while the program was open that led to a review of the eligibility criteria, we were listening and I know that we were responsive to that.

A subsequent decision was made to close the program on 1 September 2021, but to open a revised version, which was the COVID-19 Micro and Small Business Border Closure Critical Support Grant Program on 3 September 2021. We announced that the existing support package would be boosted from \$20 million to \$50 million, so you can see it started to grow at that stage. That was jointly funded by both the Tasmanian and Australian governments. Over two rounds, this renewed grant program - which was the Border Closure Critical Support Grant Program - dispersed over \$73 million to 6000 individuals. I should note that many small businesses received grants in both rounds so there was some ongoing support where businesses needed that sustained investment.

The Department of State Growth also provided what they called 'supercharged' grant payments to those businesses who were successful in their applications prior to 14 September 2021. They were made without requesting further additional information, so it was a grant program that really extended from the support that was already in place. As I've said, listening to the sector, that was an effort to alleviate some of the effort the businesses had to go to to try to get the grants. They had a lot on their plates with trying to keep their businesses alive, and if they were able to show that their trading position hadn't changed, then we were able to just respond very quickly in that relevant trading period to give them the additional amount for round 2.

In round 1, just over \$43 million in grant funding was provided to 3129 businesses, and in round two almost \$30 million was dispersed in grant funding to 2910 businesses. I do have some key statistics which you might be interested in. There were five tiers: tier 1 was \$4000, tier 2 was \$8000, tier 3 was \$20 000, tier 4 was \$35 000 and tier 5 was \$60 000. For each of those tiers, in tier 1 - which was the small amount - 669 businesses were successful; in tier 2 1159; tier 3, which was that \$20 000 layer - 1007 businesses; tier 4, 266 businesses - that was \$35 000 layer; and importantly, tier 5, which was the \$60 000 level, 28 businesses were successful. I do have the total numbers which you get by - I don't know if you want me to read all that out, but basically you can see that the middle section was where the demand was, that's between \$8000 and \$35 000, and then with some outliers as well. That was the total grant round of \$43 078 000. The second round reflected that distribution also, and I think you were interested in that, because it would have been many of the same businesses. So a very similar trajectory across tiers 1 to 5 for that second grant round.

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CHAIR - If someone got a tier 5 grant in the first round, which is the larger amount, were they likely to get another same amount or would they be in a different tier?

Ms OGILVIE - That is a very good question, and I think the answer - and I'm going to turn to Mark, probably - I think the answer is it depends on their circumstances, what they asked for.

CHAIR - Maybe we need the criteria to fit into each tier.

Ms OGILVIE - Yes, Mark, if I could ask you to expand on a little on that.

Mr BOWLES - For the first round, we requested quite a lot of information from the business, including their annual turnover as the reference period that determined what tier they were in; then also the impact in terms of turnover. So, the hardship test for most of our programs, including that program, was a 30 per cent decline in revenue. For the first round, they had to provide evidence of that decline.

In the second round, because we recognised the degree of hardship that many businesses were in, we made a balanced decision around how much administrative burden we wanted to put on businesses. For the second round, they could re-log in, affirm that all of their existing details were still correct, and affirm that they were still in hardship, and they would get the second round.

Not all of them did that. Some of them, self-assessed that they weren't in hardship, in the second round; but many did, and because the original annual reference period was the same, they would stay in the same tier.

Ms WEBB - Just to follow up on that - are those stats available? Are the stats available of how many of the businesses carried through and reaffirmed, and then received the next round?

CHAIR - Alternatively - and this question that fits in with that - in the second round, were there ones who had not claimed in the first round?

Mr BOWLES - Yes, there were some businesses that claimed for the first time in the second round. I don't have the data with me.

Ms WEBB - There might be a table that you could provide later to us.

Ms OGILVIE - To confirm with you, are you thinking about understanding the trajectory of individual businesses?

Ms WEBB - No. I was more interested in proportions, in terms of the cohort that received round one. What proportion of that cohort then carried over to round two? And then the proportion of round two that were new, et cetera, on with each of the rounds?

Ms OGILVIE - I will ask Mark to consider that. because I think in order to get that information we would have to track individual businesses. Yes, we would have to construct that information; it's something we probably could do, but we don't have it here.

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Ms WEBB - Put it on notice.

Ms OGILVIE - I have a bit more information that you might be interested in, which is sort of similar; it sits alongside that. It's the statistics for local government areas, just to give a flavour of state-wide.

I will pick some out that I think is germane to who's at the table.

CHAIR - It would be good to have all of the local government areas. We represent the whole parliament.

Ms OGILVIE - It gives you a really good flavour, of how business is doing across the state. This is by Local Government Association (LGA) of Tasmania:

LGA	Number of applications
Break O'Day	135
Brighton	99
Burnie	56
Central Coast	114
Central Highlands	30
Circular Head	94
Clarence	532
Derwent Valley	82
Devonport	135
Dorset	97
Flinders Island	21
George Town	96
Glamorgan/Spring Bay	219
Glenorchy	726
Hobart	2094
Huon Valley	266
Kentish	49
King Island	85
Kingborough	443
Latrobe	55
Launceston	832
Meander Valley	130
Northern Midlands	104
Sorell	127
Southern Midlands	32
Tasman	99
Waratah/Wynyard	42
West Coast	78
West Tamar	109

It's good to have that on *Hansard*.

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I also have a little bit of information, if you are interested, on the top industry sectors - another way of sort of looking at the data. The top industry sectors, together with a number of funded applications - and I can give you the total amount of funding by sector.

Hospitality - that is, food and beverage - 1103 applications were funded, totalling \$16 133 000. For accommodation, there were 937 funded applications with a total amount of funding of \$10 676 000. In transport, there were 1648 funded applications, with a total amount of funding of \$8 530 000. For retail and sales, there were 709 funded applications with a total of \$7 259 000 funded. Travel and tours - as you would expect, were badly hit as well - 522 funded applications with a total amount of funding of \$6 838 000. It's helpful to see it from that perspective as well, across sectors.

Mr TUCKER - A supplementary, Chair. Is it possible to find out how many businesses are in each council electorate? So you can get a percentage of how many were helped.

Ms OGILVIE - I am not certain we would have that information. I think local governments would probably have that information. Let me check.

Mr BOWLES - The ABS does provide count of business data; but down to the LGA level it is quite old and so it would not match.

Ms OGILVIE - I can see where you are going; you are thinking about percentage where its struggling in particular areas. There might be some work that can be done. I'm thinking about other ways of trying to find business registration addresses and things like that; but that would probably be more global - Tasmania or Hobart - not down to LGA level. It's an interesting question to get a sense of business health in LGAs. It might be something that LGAT could assist with.

CHAIR - Picking up on King Island, the Government media release about that caused significant harm to the businesses on the island and the tourism area. I noticed there were over 81 businesses on King Island, which was quite a lot.

Ms OGILVIE - Yes, 85 actually.

CHAIR - Was particular attention paid to King Island because of the Government's action that saw a negative impact on the island?

Ms OGILVIE - I have to apologise, because that happened before I took on this ministry. I have some information on King Island. I wasn't deeply across the media issue that you are raising.

CHAIR - Basically people were told by the Government not to go there.

Ms OGILVIE - I might ask the department to address that.

Mr EVANS - We implemented several initiatives to try to support businesses from the islands, particularly from the island's tourism operators and the economy more broadly. We developed a travel incentive program which provided \$300 towards the cost of accommodation and tourism experiences on the island, undertaken between 1 May and 31 July this year.

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The program launched to consumers for ballot registrations on 7 April and closed on 10 April. There was a process to redeem vouchers in addition to that, to try and stimulate more travel. Sharp airlines introduced a 'red-hot winter return' fare of \$300 per person between Hobart and King Island. You would be aware of the support that we've provided to Sharp Airlines to get direct flights from Hobart to King Island and to Flinders.

Tourism Tasmania also supported those initiatives by putting in place a \$100 000 promotional campaign in partnership with the local industry and council. What we tried to do in response, given all of a sudden there were not a lot of visitors to the island - for very real reasons - was to try and look at ways that we could support visitation to the island and promote that visitation.

Ms OGILVIE - Picking up the premise of your question - business confidence is a real thing and I appreciate, even though I was not in the seat at the time, that it was a very difficult time for everybody. I know that the department and the previous minister did try very much to reach out and do all that we can do for the businesses on King Island. Just yesterday, I had a roundtable with the Regional Chambers of Commerce and King Island participated in that and I heard more about the challenges going forward.

At this stage one of the positive things that I can do, is to engage as much as I can with regional communities and invite everyone to participate in our strategy setting for the 2022-26 Small Business Strategy process that we are undergoing. Now is a really good opportunity to hear more, and there might be things we did well and things we did not do well. I'm open to having all of that feedback. If that is what people would like to bring forward, then by all means do get in touch with me.

Mr EVANS - Through Government and Business Tasmania, we were in contact with a lot of businesses that were reporting impacts due to cancellations owing to COVID-19, and we did send a delegation to the island. Representatives of the department travelled and met with a whole range of businesses about their individual circumstances, and also with local government industry representatives to try and get a more detailed picture of what the impacts were and designing the sorts of supports that we could then put in place to try and stimulate increased demand and deal with the impacts on those individual businesses.

CHAIR - I want to go to the \$3.5 million in support to the southern Tasmanian businesses impacted by the 15 October 2021 lockdown direction. Can I have a breakdown of the sorts of businesses and how much they were paid, and did it also include the businesses that were impacted in Queenstown by the cancellation of Unconformity, because some of those were food businesses that travelled up from Hobart? Was that included in the \$3.5 million? I know support was provided there.

Ms OGILVIE - At a higher level, the southern lockdown emergency support, or support for southern Tasmanian businesses that were required to go into lockdown, was as a result of a three-day lockdown direction that was issued on 15 October 2021. As you say, almost \$3.5 million was provided in support. The Government felt that it acted quickly to implement the support program, and it was available to eligible businesses from the affected local government areas of Brighton, The Central Highlands, Clarence City, Derwent Valley, Glamorgan/Spring Bay, Glenorchy, Hobart City, Huon Valley, Sorell, Southern Midlands, Tasman, and Kingborough.

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I am assuming, and I will check this with the department, that the location of the business, for example, a food business that perhaps travelled to Unconformity but is based here, would have been eligible as a southern business. Does that answer your question?

CHAIR - Not entirely, because there was also business support provided to Queenstown businesses that were also similarly impacted, so that must be an additional bucket of money somewhere.

Mr BOWLES - There was a separate program administered in partnership with West Coast Council. We provided an amount - I don't have that amount with me - to the West Coast Council, which they then distributed to the impacted businesses with criteria that we agreed upon. We can provide more detailed information on notice.

CHAIR - If you could provide that; and the money that was provided to West Coast Council to distribute.

Mr BOWLES - We can take that on notice.

CHAIR - Back to the \$3.5 million, can you go through the criteria and the sort of businesses that were supported through that?

Ms OGILVIE - Yes, I can help with that. From 21 October to 1 November 2021, grants of \$1000 were available to any business with a minimum turnover of \$25 000, that was forced to close for the duration of the southern lockdown.

A grant of \$750 was available to any business with a minimum turnover of \$25 000 that was able to open, but with restrictions, due to the southern lockdown. I was thinking about markets and things like that.

I can report that 3398 applications were submitted, with 3141 of those approved for either a \$750 or a \$1000 grant - a very high rate of success. That totaled over \$3.1 million.

An additional payment of up to \$10 000 was also available for those businesses that lost perishable goods in fridges, that had to be discarded as a direct result of the lockdown order. Two hundred and ninety-two businesses were approved for loss of perishables grants, totaling \$333 000. Again, a thank you to Business Tasmania and its communications team and the work that was done very quickly to help in this very unusual situation.

Mr WILLIE - I have some questions on the reopening plan and what was in place, Minister, and what consultation your department did with public health. Obviously, there was a very clear plan for the reopening, but once the border opened, we saw a number of those plans not go to plan and in some cases the plans were abandoned. We saw contact tracing abandoned. We saw business hot spots, where they were being listed on Government websites, abandoned. I'm interested in how the department was working with public health through that time?

Ms OGILVIE - The business planning side, about how we dovetailed in with what was happening?

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Mr WILLIE - Making sure that Public Health understood how those decisions were impacting business. Through that time, we saw businesses in the media saying that their whole business had dried up.

Ms OGILVIE - It was a very difficult time. Even yesterday I sat with a group of business owners in Hobart from a range of different sectors, and the emotion about that time is still very real.

Because it's departmental, I will ask Mr Evans to comment.

Mr EVANS - There was very close consultation or involvement with my agency in those decisions - understanding, of course, that they were decisions based around public health. We could provide information and we were in close dialogue, almost on a daily basis. For example, I was part of the heads of agency COVID-19 Coordination Committee, that would meet sometimes twice a week to oversight and provide input into the development of the reopening plan. Officers within my agency were similarly engaged; that was really important because we had a lot of planning to do on our side, from the communication perspective, with businesses that we can access through Business Tasmania, to make sure that they had the right information and as comprehensive information as was possible in the lead up to the reopening decision and then through to reopening itself.

I can't go chapter and verse into every last piece of detail, but I can say that we were very closely involved with public health.

Mr WILLIE - I guess, minister, your hands would have been tied because some of these decisions were being made at a national level, such as close contact protocols. That also impacted business; if you were a close contact, you couldn't go to work.

Ms OGILVIE - Yes, and again as a new minister; but certainly, I was around during all of that time and probably much like you was receiving a lot of cries for help from the community generally, and businesses.

We were all very aware of the necessity to follow public health instructions at all times. We weren't in a position to put something else in that prime position when we have public health directions, and we followed those directions at all times. It did mean that there were serious impacts across a range of fronts in small business, unfortunately. But with great resilience, grit and determination, they took some of those blows.

That's from a political perspective, that's the answer I would give, that public health takes primacy when those directions happen. Having said that, I think what my secretary would say is they did absolutely everything they could to try to keep things going as well as they could in that circumstance.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, what feedback did your department provide about the Check in TAS app? There was a period towards the end where people thought that we're all having to check in, and the Government is not using it. We did hear this morning that they were using it in high risk situations.

Ms OGILVIE - I do have a little bit of information, and I think that is right, you probably have heard already. I have a particular interest in the check in app as well. The check in app

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was really a remarkable very quick invention at the beginning of the pandemic, so credit for tech skills getting that going.

Mr WILLIE - I think it was borrowed from the ACT, wasn't it?

Ms OGILVIE - I don't even know if we'd go as far as borrowed, but certainly there was work done together and collaboration. I know my department and the IT guys were really involved in doing that and making things fit for purpose. We can say borrowed but I'd like to think it was a little bit more collaborative.

It was introduced on 1 December 2020; it was to be used as a resource for that elimination and containment strategy, and I think we all know how that was deployed. It ceased being used from 2 May 2022, but the information you've just shared is that Public Health can trace individuals who've attended areas of concern still through other means and measures, working with event organisers, if you think about ticketing and those sorts of things or through social media to message attendees. My personal experience is people know who they've been with when you get the call, 'oh, my family, we've just been tested, just be aware', so that social network is quite strong here in Tasmania as well.

There was case tracing in high-risk settings such as aged care, hospitals and schools with other prevention mechanisms in place as well, and exposure site reporting. Due to the nature and spread of the omicron variant, the Public Health advice was that reporting of exposure sites was no longer an effective tool in managing COVID-19 cases in the community. I think that lends weight to what you're saying.

I don't know if it's helpful for me to read out all of this, it's a lot of information about check in apps, I think you've probably heard a lot of it this morning. It was just one of the means of collecting that information and there was obviously a change and we did rollback the need to use the check in app over time. My secretary is indicating he can add a little bit more to that answer.

Mr EVANS - One of the important roles that we played was as a conduit for information to businesses, and government did provide us with some additional funding to set up an education and support service for small businesses. We had a dedicated call centre set up via Business Tasmania to answer any Check in TAS app-related questions, providing advice and support regarding how to use the app.

In addition, we set up a team who moved around the state; they visited some 40 towns and cities providing free face-to-face support, knocking on businesses' doors, including visits to King Island and Flinders Island. People could access information through the dedicated website and call centre, but they also got contact face to face in all sorts of regional towns right across the state.

Ms OGILVIE - Sorry, Chair, I understand we have that information on the West Coast Council for you if you would like, if it's a good time now?

CHAIR - Excellent.

Mr BOWLES - Upon cancellation of the Unconformity event, we engaged with the tourism and hospitality industry and the West Coast Council and other key stakeholders. An

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agreement was formed between the council and the Department of State Growth that one-off payments of \$500 would be made available for impacted businesses in the retail, tourism, and hospitality sectors and in addition, reimbursement for damaged, perishable goods of up to \$10 000 per business.

So, the West Coast Council and Department of State Growth agreed to fund those grants on a 50/50 basis and both the Department of State Growth and the West Coast Council agreed to contribute up to \$25 000 with that grant program closing in March. I understand that discussions were ongoing between the Unconformity Festival and Events Tasmania with regard to its future.

CHAIR - Just with regard to the \$25 000 each from council and state, how much of it was actually provided to businesses?

Mr BOWLES - I would have to come back on the acquittal. That is dependent on the acquittal that the West Coast Council needs to provide to State Growth.

CHAIR - Right. So, whatever was spent, you were going to pay half of it, is that right?

Mr BOWLES - That is right.

CHAIR - Would you be able to provide the amount that has been paid?

Mr BOWLES - We can provide that, I would just have to confirm that the final acquittal is in.

CHAIR - Thank you, and I do acknowledge my interest in Unconformity as a board member too and acknowledging that there was funding to support the revamping of the festival.

Ms OGILVIE - I should disclose I was previously their legal adviser - two disclosures for the price of one, Chair. Got to be careful about these things.

CHAIR - I just want to go to the COVID-19 business impact support program, is that where you are going with?

Ms WEBB - No, mine are on some of the other matters.

CHAIR - Minister, as I understand it, this was to assist businesses in which staff were critical in their role in keeping the business open and the money that was provided for that. Can you provide some further breakdown of the funding provided for that, but also, I notice there were three rounds -

Mr Willie - Four.

CHAIR - Four was it?

Ms OGILVIE - Yes, four, we kept it going with quite a long tail to make sure everyone was secured.

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CHAIR - Okay, we talked about this previously with the Premier. There was almost a shadow lockdown when the borders reopened and a lot of the more vulnerable people in our community, older people, people who were very anxious did not go to hospitality events at all. They just stayed at home and did not even go shopping.

So, did this pick up that activity or was that more in the broader business support grants?

Ms OGILVIE - We had four grant rounds, which did go across quite a period of time and the way the grant program works is the business obviously, if it is suffering financially or has other issues, will put an application in. So, the reason for that during the pandemic would be part of why they would come forward. You have talked about the shadow lockdown, I am not sure what the technical term is, but if there was a reduction in sales and profits for whatever reason during this period, a business would be able to put an application in, so I think that helps.

CHAIR - Under this particular program?

Ms OGILVIE - Under the program, and I will ask Mark to go through the detail of what the grant application covered and the scope. Certainly, businesses that were suffering, particularly if they had that trajectory across the four grant rounds and the department was familiar with that business, they would understand where their profits were headed.

It might be helpful if I give a bit of an overview about those four grant rounds and how they operated and you have specifically asked about a particular point in time during those grant rounds.

CHAIR - It talks about having suffered a significant reduction in demand.

Ms OGILVIE - That is right, exactly.

CHAIR - That time when we saw people hibernating a bit.

Ms OGILVIE - Do you have a date range on that?

CHAIR - This first one was in January, I think. The first one started when the borders opened and that is when some the more vulnerable members of our community decided not to get out and about.

Ms OGILVIE - That would have impacted demand and may have caused some businesses to come forward. Why don't I give a general overview and then we can get into the detail. Mr Bowles has already identified some there. At the high level, we know over \$165 million has been provided across business in COVID-19 specific support. The Business Impact Support program was developed to assist businesses experiencing a downturn due to loss of customers or staff during specified periods originally as the result of the borders opening.

Over four funding rounds, the Business Impact Support Grant program has provided businesses with the opportunity to access between \$4 000 and \$40 000 and has resulted in more than \$6.5 million in grants flowing directly to almost 3 000 businesses. I have a lot of detail about the data associated with each of those grant rounds but to get directly to your question, I think Mr Bowles has some information that might be more specific.

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Mr BOWLES - With this grant program, like others, there was a hardship test. It was a 30 per cent revenue downturn test.

CHAIR - From what point? This is well into the pandemic now. A 30 per cent reduction from when?

Mr WILLIE - Based off JobKeeper eligibility? Is that where it came from?

Ms OGILVIE - Just through me please. Mr Bowles does have that information.

Mr BOWLES - Yes, 30 per cent was chosen to be consistent with the national test that we believed would be the most appropriate test. For example, in round 1 applicants were required to demonstrate a minimum 30 per cent reduction in turnover between 15 December 2021 and 14 January 2022 inclusive, compared to the same period for the previous years. That could be due to either critical staff being required to isolate or being forced to close due to a public health direction or having suffered a significant reduction in demand.

With the subsequent four rounds, those reference periods effectively moved by one month. If they were able to show that they continued to be suffering from a revenue decline by 30 per cent or more with reference to the equivalent month a year before they would receive the next round payment.

CHAIR - The fourth round has closed, minister?

Ms OGILVIE - Yes, I think the fourth round has just closed. Is that right?

Mr BOWLES - On 12 May.

Ms OGILVIE - Mr Willie, I do not want to move off, did that answer your question?

Mr WILLIE - Yes.

Ms WEBB - To stay with that for a moment, those four rounds. We have some details there about the quantum of money in total in each round and the number of businesses. Would it be the case, minister, that similarly to the other grant round we discussed a short while ago that some would have carried over and been the same business into each round?

Ms OGILVIE - I will need to check that but it is logical that would be the case.

Ms WEBB - I would be interested to know similarly as it was with that last grant round program we discussed; what proportion then, and how that looks statistically in terms of businesses as they are tracked through those rounds? We can put that on notice with the other one if that is not readily available at the moment.

Ms OGILVIE - I will check in with the department to see what we might have. If we have it here we will try and give it to you.

Mr BOWLES - The information that we have at hand is for round 1, there was \$1.96 million dispersed; for round 2, there was \$1.685 million; for round 3, there was

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\$1.620 million; and for round 4, there was \$1.210 million. I don't have a comparison of exactly which businesses tracked through.

Ms WEBB - To be clear, I'm not interested in having the detail of the particular businesses. The information in the submission that we received, Minister, is that in round 1, it's described as \$1.8 million provided to 949 businesses; in round 2, \$1.65 million provided to 749 businesses; et cetera. I am interested to know, of the 949 in the first round, how many of those carried through to make up what proportion of 749 in the second round, et cetera. Is that able to be provided?

Mr BOWLES - I don't have the statistics in front of me; but our understanding from talking to the businesses is that most of the businesses that were eligible in the first round then carried through. There were very few businesses that came in for the first time in subsequent rounds; most in the subsequent rounds had received one in a previous round.

CHAIR - Of all the businesses that have received money in the more recent round that we've talked about today, have any of them subsequently gone out of business?

Ms OGILVIE - We are keeping a very close eye on that question. We're all looking towards post-pandemic life, and that's part of the reason I'm doing the refreshed Strategy for Small Business - what does business look like post-pandemic and how can we ensure that everybody is up and running? We do have a little bit of information on the pressure on businesses, and some who might be making changes, and we're keeping a close eye on that. I should just say for those who are watching, there are two grants available through Business Tasmania; one is for accounting assistance, and one is for legal assistance. I encourage any small business that is still struggling or having problems, to reach out early so that we can assist. In relation to your specific question, that's one I'd have to ask the department, I don't know if I can track that down to the specific, whether anybody has gone out of business or not.

Ms WEBB - Maybe I could reframe it a little. What statistics do we have about the number of businesses that may have closed permanently due to COVID-19 since reopening through to now, six months or so ago.

Ms OGILVIE - I will ask Mark to respond to that; but I think the way you phrased the question that we probably wouldn't get into that level of granularity. I know we have some statistics around pressure on businesses, bankruptcies, liquidations, those sorts of things, so let's start with that.

Mr BOWLES - We're not able to track in terms of those - particularly the COVID-19 grants - whether those particular businesses have subsequently gone out of business.

Ms WEBB - That is the way the Chair phrased it about those ones; the way I phrased it was more of what information we had of any statistics on the number of businesses that have closed permanently due to COVID-19 from the time of reopening, which is broader than just the ones who received grants.

Ms OGILVIE - I think the 'due to COVID-19' part is going to be hard, but let's start broadly with the statistics around the bankruptcies issue.

CHAIR - That would give an indication.

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Mr BOWLES - The data that we track is the bankruptcies administrations data that the Australian Financial Securities Authority publishes, and also the Tasmanian Treasury. For example, there were 34 bankruptcies in the March quarter. It doesn't provide information about the reason for bankruptcies, but that was 34 in total which included personal bankruptcies and business bankruptcies. While that is an increase of 13.3 per cent from the same quarter the previous year, the general trend in Tasmanian bankruptcies has gone down. For example, prior to 2017, there were over 100 bankruptcies per quarter. That's the main figure that we would track.

Ms OGILVIE - Not terrible news.

Ms WEBB - It's one indication, isn't it - but a lot of people who might have closed their business because it was no longer viable won't necessarily have gone bankrupt. I think it's not quite as indicative as I was looking for; but perhaps we aren't able to track that picture as carefully as we might.

Ms OGILVIE - We generally don't do that, from a Government perspective. To find that sort of information, you need to talk to some of the liquidators about who they are working with and why. I have been in small business myself, and I have opened businesses, and I have closed businesses. There can be a multitude of reasons why people choose to do that. I am not sure that we are going to be able to get to the detail of that for you.

Ms WEBB - I wonder if the peak bodies in those industries might have a better indication, and whether that is something that you collect from them, as an indicative picture for the state?

Ms OGILVIE - Yes. I mean, we work closely with the Small Business Council and the Tasmanian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (TCCI), but I am not aware if they have done surveys.

I do feel that there is a general connection with confidence, as you raised earlier. That's a very delicate balance that we have. You are asking good questions, but it's hard to know what is in business owner's mind when they are making decisions about growing, staying, closing, moving, selling, those sorts of things.

Ms WEBB - Sure; but there are some clear instances where a business ended up closing, as a fairly direct result of what happened since reopening,. It would be an interesting part of our understanding of the impact of the period of time; not as a criticism to anyone, just to fully understand what happened, to have that picture for our state.

Can I move onto something else?

CHAIR - What we are seeking is the number of businesses that have closed, whether it be by bankruptcy or because they have decided they just do not want to be in business anymore, or it is all too hard in the current environment. I don't know if that is possible to get?

Ms OGILVIE - You would have to really survey everybody's businesses and ask them, and I do not know if people would want to tell you.

Ms WEBB - When they are closed, we will not be able to survey them anymore.

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Ms OGILVIE - Potentially the peak bodies, the liquidators, the lawyers, people buying and selling businesses. It is a big bite to ask your reasons.

Ms WEBB - Let's move onto something else. I am interested to understand a little bit more about how you have gauged the effectiveness and the use of the resources that were created, which sound really positive. I am looking at on Page 47, of the submission that was made. It is part of the same dot point list.

The one I will start with is the dedicated hotline to provide information and support, and presumably point people towards opportunities for support like the grant rounds.

Have you got some details you can provide about the usage of the hotline? Not just outright calls taken, that would be an obvious one; but the nature of support provided through the hotline and how that looks as a picture, and how you have evaluated its effectiveness.

Ms OGILVIE - I will give a little overview. I think the department will be able to speak broadly about that.

We had a huge amount of positive feedback from the business community about the single point of contact, and the responsive of Business Tasmania. Certainly, I am so proud of the work they did over two years in a very difficult situation. They flexed into a new customer service mode, and have continued that.

The feedback has been very strong and good and I think Business Tasmania is in really good shape, at the moment. That is an overview.

The hotline would have been just one of the ways that people were connecting into Business Tasmania for help. Mark, would like to talk a little bit about that, but perhaps also more broadly around the other ways that people were reaching in.

Mr BOWLES - During the peak of COVID-19, the Business Tasmania service was expanded from its pre-COVID-19 level of 2.6 FTEs up to 25 FTEs per day. That included staff that were redeployed from other areas of the agency. At peak periods, we also used contract staff.

Since 1 July 2021, Business Tasmania responded to 9042 calls from businesses seeking assistance regarding COVID-19 queries - in particular, the Check in TAS app, COVID-19 safe events, and general business queries on how to access the range of COVID-19 support programs.

Business Tasmania also engages with over 12 700 businesses via the weekly electronic newsletter. That mechanism was also utilised in real time whenever there was a change to the public health settings that impacted businesses. That would be then distributed through that mechanism as well.

To add to that, Business Tasmania provides ongoing assistance to businesses with information on licensing and permits through the Australian Business Licence Information Service. Other grants and eligibility services, assistance on employing staff and linking them to Fair Work Tasmania, and also referrals through to the enterprise centres for more detailed business advice.

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In addition to Business Tasmania, where there are other businesses that work in particular sectors, such as tourism and hospitality or advanced manufacturing or science and technology, they would have other ongoing support from those relevant sector teams in the department.

Ms WEBB - The final part of that is about how you've been able to review it or assess its effectiveness. Will that be undertaken in a structured way and maybe a report so we could see a bit more detail?

Ms OGILVIE - I will again say that some incredible responsiveness and reflectiveness happened during that time with Business Tasmania. The feedback that we were getting - and we are still getting - was that businesses were finding it very easy to do business with Business Tasmania. We've got this organisation that was able to flex up and meet the need of market in real time, given what was going on.

I've been working with a small business advocate and with the department on looking at learnings from that customer service responsiveness, and that model, to see what else we can do to ensure that we keep that trajectory in place.

My goal is to make it very easy for business to do business with government. That is a key thing that we are looking at. I think we have a leading light for that in Business Tasmania. They have done that beautifully.

We have other work going on through IT and Service Tasmania, work that again, is about making it easy for consumers, customers, residents and constituents to engage with government as well. The single point of contact work is really important, and customer-focused work.

There is a little project that we funded in the budget, \$50 000 to do some of that work and it will capture some of the learnings of what we did very well. I will throw to the secretary, but from my perspective and what I have seen is that not only did they do things in a very agile way, but they've continued to perform at that level. I think it has been embedded across what Business Tasmania does.

Mr EVANS - Thank you, minister. I can add a little bit of context. It was a very uncertain, dynamic and rapidly changing environment and we needed to adapt and be far more flexible and agile as a consequence.

If you're thinking about what our measures of success might look like, our key goal, as an agency supporting small business in particular, but all businesses, was to support them to get through to the other side so that they were in good shape to recover. If you reflect on the statistics that Mr Bowles read out a little while ago, we've been really successful in that.

Ms WEBB - Can I point out, because I'm mindful we haven't got much time. My question isn't about inviting you to tell me about how successful it was. My question is a structural question. Is there going to be a formal evaluation or review that then is reported on about the hotline and the other support measures that were put in place?

Ms OGILVIE - The communications piece?

Ms WEBB - About the functioning of the support measures put in place, including the hotline, the forums that were mentioned which you haven't talked about yet and I've got on my

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list. I'm not asking were they successful, I'm asking are you going to be reviewing and evaluating and presenting that information?

Mr EVANS - The simple answer to that is, of course. We will not do it in a formal, structured way. We review and evaluate all of our programs all of the time and learn from what works and what does not work in designing future programs. We will not, at a point in time, produce a report saying 'this is the evaluation of our COVID-19 response and learnings' but we will learn, as we have done on a continuous basis.

I would say that, through COVID, every time we have had to respond to a different challenge, we have learned from the previous challenge and adapted and built new tools. By way of one example, with the opening up, we anticipated that everything would not go perfectly well with some of the pressures on businesses and that there might need to be further support. We designed up a sort of framework document that we presented to government that would enable government to make rapid decisions in support programs if certain things happened along the way.

That was really successful because with the program we have just talked about a few minutes ago, when community confidence and visitation started to wane post cases entering our community, we were in a position to very quickly give the Government some advice on what sort of supports we might put in place and roll those out really quickly. That is, I guess, an example of where we have used our learnings and the previous evaluation -

Ms WEBB - Minister, that sounds really positive and I absolutely, wholeheartedly believe that that has been a very successful trajectory. We have been agile, developed, learnt and whatever. I am a little sad to hear, though, that you are not in some way reviewing and reporting on that more actively. It was quite pleasant to hear the Health department, when we spoke with them just earlier, talk about how they are actually doing a formal review of various elements and will be reporting on various elements of COVID-related responses. I think that is really good accountability and useful for other people from the outside to see. Given the success of the learning and the growing and developing, I would encourage you to think about providing that.

Ms OGILVIE - We do have my customer service project - I call it 'I am passionate about customer service' project - which is looking at a component of that and how we have flexed into a more customer-focused way of working. That work will be underway but it is embedded in the way of doing business and not be producing sort of report (indistinct) considering. I will take that as a comment.

CHAIR - We are pretty much out of time, is there anything urgent, Meg? Anything else?

Ms WEBB - Nothing urgent.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. We did not need to go into the digital stuff because it was not actually part of our terms of reference -

Ms OGILVIE - No, that is fine. I was ready, though.

CHAIR - We are focusing their business support, particularly. Thank you very much for your time today and your evidence.

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THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.
