

CLUBS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION COVID-19 RESPONSE INQUIRY

Clubs Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Government's COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

Clubs Australia represents over 6,000 licensed clubs that employ more than 140,000 people. Clubs are not-for-profit, member-owned organisations whose central activity is to provide sporting, social, and recreation infrastructure to their members and the wider community.

The club industry was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As social hubs, hospitality venues faced greater challenge in limiting gatherings and maintaining social distancing. Clubs were forced to either close their premises entirely or remain open with considerable operating restrictions. The restrained trading environment placed a significant financial burden on clubs, with one venue reporting an approximate loss of \$50 million in revenue.

The closures had a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of employees and patrons, preventing them from working, connecting, and socialising.

Many clubs were required to enforce mask mandates and other health and safety measures once they re-opened, which placed them at the forefront of abuse and violence from community members who opposed the rules imposed by the government.

The National Cabinet served as a platform for states and territories and the Commonwealth to work collaboratively to respond to concerns, alleviating anxiety being felt by businesses. The JobKeeper payment and other forms of financial assistance provided a crucial lifeline for clubs, enabling them to retain many employees, and re-open venues faster as restrictions eased.

Clubs transformed their facilities into centrally located health hubs, providing COVID-19 vaccinations and PCR tests. Venues offered incentives, such as 'Schooner or Schnitzel for a Shot' and 'Bingo Booster', to encourage members and their communities to vaccinate. Some clubs provided care packages and operated food delivery services to assist those in need.

The club sector is continuing to recover from COVID-19. The crisis has caused a perception of job insecurity, workforce issues, reduced patronage due to heightened health and safety concerns, and persistent economic challenges.

Clubs Australia believes there are opportunities to improve Australia's preparedness and approach for future pandemics and to better integrate clubs into future pandemic responses.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Partner with clubs on any future pandemic response to establish vaccination centres and testing clinics in clubs.
- Explore using clubs to serve as venues for basic medical care treatment and vaccination storage facilities.
- Retain financial support to businesses during future pandemics and increase assistance to affected hospitality workers to maintain their regular rate of pay.

CASE STUDY: CLUBS SUPPORTING LOCAL COMMUNITIES DURING COVID-19

Broken Hill Musicians Club, located in regional NSW, converted their venue into a vaccination centre and provided free transportation for Indigenous communities to and from the club. When the remote town of Wilcannia encountered difficulties in obtaining crucial necessities from suppliers, the Club stepped in and delivered food.

Staff members at Cabra-Vale Diggers conducted daily check-in calls with members and provided assistance where needed. This ensured staff and members were engaged during the lockdowns.

PARTNER WITH CLUBS TO SUPPORT PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Clubs have a number of characteristics which make them optimal venues and businesses to support a pandemic response.

For instance, many clubs occupy large venues with adjacent car parks, and are commonly situated in central community locations. Given their strong community footprint, clubs also tend to be accessible venues to older people and those living with disability.

For these reasons, clubs frequently acted as COVID-19 testing sites and vaccination centres, with many clubs also able to stand-up employees to perform clerical tasks associated with this function.

Many clubs, such as Dubbo RSL Club, in regional NSW, also allocated their parking area to local pathology centres for testing purposes.

Clubs were able to activate as vaccination centres and testing sites rapidly, often in response to community outbreaks or identified gaps in vaccination coverage.

Clubs Australia worked productively with the Australian Department of Health to activate clubs as booster vaccination hubs for people with a disability.

We believe that fostering similar partnerships to establish clubs as first and second dose vaccination centres, as well as testing sites, could have led to better public health outcomes.

In NSW, 30 clubs were designated as vaccination hubs during the pandemic, despite other venues being capable in areas that needed coverage. In other states and territories, only a few clubs were used as vaccination centres.

Clubs Australia believes additional venues could have been transformed into PCR testing clinics. This would have alleviated the prolonged wait times at alternative testing locations, which stretched up to 8 hours.

Clubs Australia recommends that the Federal Government partner with clubs on any future pandemic response to establish vaccination centres and testing clinics in venues.

EXPLORE USING CLUBS FOR BASIC MEDICAL TREATMENT AND VACCINE STORAGE

As centrally located venues across NSW, clubs can function as basic health centres, offering essential medical care and vaccination storage facilities.

Venues have been previously transformed into successful emergency response hubs or evacuation centres.

Clubs Australia believes clubs could be employed as health clinics if hospitals are overwhelmed and operating at full capacity during pandemics.

Using clubs for these health purposes would be crucial in regional and rural areas, where people may need to travel up to 400km to access fundamental medical services.

Clubs Australia recommends exploring whether clubs can be used to serve as venues for basic medical care treatment and, where possible support vaccination storage.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO BUSINESSES AND THEIR WORKERS

Clubs Australia commends the JobKeeper scheme for offering immediate financial relief to clubs and their employees. A comprehensive Clubs Australia survey found that, after the March 2020 lockdowns, and prior to JobKeeper's announcement, clubs had retained 99 per cent of their employees, with the industry overwhelmingly opting against redundancies.

The support from JobKeeper supported clubs in retaining their staff while ensuring they were financially supported. The program assisted clubs in keeping essential staff crucial to their operations and reopening quickly as restrictions lifted.

While the financial support for club workers was welcome, and generous, many workers still experienced a reduction in income. Many clubs increased the JobKeeper payments, so employees were not worse off. However, doing so caused major losses for clubs, and a substantial erosion in liquid assets.

Those clubs who could not afford to increase their workers' income lost many staff to industries that remained open.

A survey conducted in January 2022 found that 60 per cent of NSW clubs had observed their staff permanently leaving hospitality for more stable industries like supermarkets.

Additionally, the JobSaver program offered some assistance to clubs, but many venues expressed that the support did not cover the significant losses experienced during the lockdowns and operating restrictions. In the future, further consideration should be given to how the financial disadvantages in affected industries can be addressed through Government assistance.

Due to these COVID-19 impacts, many clubs are continuing to experience financial difficulties and workforce shortages, with a lingering and ongoing concern about the insecurity of hospitality work.

In the past couple of years, several clubs have been forced to close their doors or amalgamate due to the financial impact of the pandemic. Consequently, many towns now lack a communal space that offers a safe and friendly environment, fostering opportunities for people to connect.

Clubs Australia believes sustaining the regular pay rates of affected hospitality workers could have alleviated the workforce shortages and financial challenges currently faced by clubs.

Clubs Australia recommends the Commonwealth Government retains financial support to businesses during future pandemics and increases assistance to affected hospitality workers to maintain their regular rate of pay.

Clubs Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission. For further information, please contact Simon Sawday, Executive Manager of Policy and Government.