

October 12, 2021, Statement – Support & Clarity Required

The Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance (VRCA) in its capacity representing regional Chambers and Business Associations, writes to advocate on several issues which are significant and of immediate urgency. We ask for your action and support on these issues to enable us to support and deliver what Regional Victoria needs to survive this pandemic.

Support for Businesses

To ensure that businesses will survive and eventually commence their recovery we plead with Government to keep support packages in place for those that remain under restricted trade. The majority of these businesses not only have restricted trade but increased workload requiring additional employees in every shift. If we are going to put the onus on our businesses to police many of these policies the Government must provide them with both the appropriate training and financial support.

Financial Support for regional Chambers of Commerce

We ask for financial support for regional Chambers of Commerce to provide assistance at a local level to small businesses and medium enterprises. It is clear that we know our communities and business operators best and are in the strongest position to deliver targeted support services and advice to assist in keeping our local economies afloat. Regional Chambers have a greater reach and capability to meaningfully engage more regional businesses because we know who our businesses are and what they need. We can deliver more and better participant outcomes.

With our revenue raising activities seriously curtailed and businesses needing to reduce spending drastically in 2020 the continuation of all our services will be challenging. Businesses are still fighting for survival and access to services provided by regional Chambers is key, unfortunately we are seeing those that need help the most are unable to afford membership renewal fees, but we will continue to support them because they need our help.

With additional support during this time from the State Government for regional chambers of commerce, we will be able to continue our targeted local support services at the current level, as well as increase the support and promotion on offer. We implore you to assist us and in turn businesses across regional Victoria.

Vaccine Economy

The State Government has announced that Vaccinated Economy trials will commence around regional Victoria. The VRCA welcomes this next step towards getting our economy back open permanently and allowing businesses to commence their recovery uninterrupted from what will be almost two years of frequent disruption to their ability to trade. However, the VRCA is asking for an aligned and agreed position between Federal and State Governments on a nationally-consistent approach to mandatory vaccinations in the workplace, vaccination passports and greater freedoms for vaccinated Australians

With the Vaccinated Economy comes many questions, that businesses will need clarity on including;

- the employer's rights and obligations to request, record and disclose the vaccination status of employees and contractors, and to whom
- Clarity around how employers should deal with exemptions from vaccination and/or mask wearing and/or workplace attendance which traverses issues of health, religious and cultural considerations i.e. medical certificate
- what mechanism will be there to prevent employees, contractors, and customers from taking legal action against them for enforcing proof of COVID-19 vaccination as a condition of employment, entry or participation

Business will require clear guidelines and financial support to implement the requirements that accompany the vaccine economy. We want to see vaccination requirements legislated to help protect business owners and staff from patrons and customers who object to the vaccination requirement as well as a seamless system for checking vaccination status.

Business Mentoring

The mentoring program that was assigned to the Victorian Chamber of Commerce is soon drawing to a close, we appreciate the State Governments recognition of the importance of continued business development. Regional towns and cities have very individual needs and the relationships we hold with our communities are strong. If this program is to continue and or any others commence, we would request that consideration be given to funding Regional Chambers to deliver mentoring and or other programs launched within regional Victoria. There are a number of established and shovel ready regional mentoring and capacity building programs ready to continue on or begin with funding .

Regional Chambers are in the best position to provide on the ground support, build capacity and capability, and get in front of more businesses within regional Victoria, because regional Chambers can deliver support to regional Victorians by regional Victorians. Programs delivered regionally are cost effective and can have higher participation due to the local knowledge, engagement and support provided to businesses by the people that know them and who they trust.

Our reasoning includes that:

- Regional Chambers have a greater reach and capability to meaningfully engage more regional businesses in programs because we know who our businesses are and what they need. We can deliver more and better participant outcomes.
- Regional Chambers can deliver tailored and effective mentoring and ensure that capacity building and individual business based needs are met, because we understand the needs of businesses in our regions. There are already well established regional mentoring frameworks that can be leveraged i.e. Geelong Chamber Mentoring Program, Be More Digital Mentoring by Commerce Ballarat,
- Regional Chambers are themselves strongly placed to provide framework and mentoring support for emerging regional trader and business groups to enable them to deliver the support needed by their local businesses
- Regional campaigns have a broader community reach and cut through because of the effective use of local engagement activities including local radio, local news, and locally tailored events including local industry experts, i.e. Business Excellence & Development Program by Colac Chamber

Yours sincerely
Jodie Gillett on behalf of the
Victorian Regional Chamber Alliance

