

Victorian Parliament's Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

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

Latrobe City Council Submission

July 2020



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Introduction

Latrobe City Council welcomes the opportunity to provide its response to the Victorian Parliament's Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's public inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Latrobe City is one of Victoria's four major Regional Cities, located 135 km east of Melbourne. This submission summarises key issues experienced by our diverse community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the related measures by the Victorian Government.

The submission also highlights the actions taken by Latrobe City Council in this context, demonstrating the important role of local government as a trusted point of contact for communities during a pandemic response, and makes recommendations for future consideration.

Community Impacts

Although the COVID-19 impacts on the Latrobe City community have been diverse and profound, community members have mostly adapted well to the COVID-19 restrictions and related challenges.

In an effort to respond to the COVID-19 related challenges such as issues related to interpreting the restriction guidelines and short lead times to restrictions, Latrobe City Council has established a dedicated community Helpline to provide direct and timely support and assistance to community. The Helpline provides an in depth understanding of current and emerging impacts of COVID-19 on our community.

Council is utilising its extensive community and service networks, underpinned by demographic data to provide assertive outreach to vulnerable community members.

In reaching out to the most diverse range of community members, we are ensuring our community is connected, safe and well.

This outreach is also informed by a strong network of partnerships with community leaders, and respected and trusted community agencies.

In addition to providing community focused support and assistance information gathered from the Helpline, subsequent strength based community interventions will inform recovery activities in our communities and the work of the co-designed Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan.

In addition, Working for Victoria (WFV) has been a welcomed initiative to support COVID-19 impacted community members to find paid work, while contributing to the community's recovery from COVID-19. Challenges experienced by Council relating to this initiative include short submission timeframes and long wait times to hear the outcomes.

Latrobe City has secured a total of 68 roles. Although a significant workload increase for the Latrobe City recruitment team, both in preparing the Position Descriptions and duties, advertising via the WFV platform and recruitment, this process has gone relatively well for Council and provided increased resources in a number of departments across the organisation.

As an additional issue impacting the community, there are a number of 'junior' football competitions that are currently operating within Latrobe City and the broader Gippsland region; these range from U18 years to U8 years of age, with growing number of spectators. These competitions have commenced at a time when the number of COVID-19 positive tests in the State of Victoria has risen sharply. This appears to be inconsistent with the rules around not having mass gatherings outdoors or indoors, thus posing a significant health risk and creating confusion within the community.

Some of these competitions, especially for the older age groups involve significant amount of travel within the vast Gippsland region, where the number of COVID-19 positive tests are also on the increase.

Competitions have commenced with approval from the AFL, the various football leagues and local councils providing permission for use of grounds, under strict specified COVID-19 conditions. It is understood that spectators are allowed with social distancing, however there does not appear to be restrictions on the number of spectators, and not all stay in their vehicles. The way these conditions and restrictions are enforced and managed is of concern, and there does not appear to be an adequate level of checking that the rules and restrictions are being applied, many rules are subject to interpretation and are not applied with consistency to keep people safe.

The direct impacts of COVID-19 on our community, identified in collaboration with other community agencies include:

Table 1: COVID-19 Impacts on Latrobe Community

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
Additional support was required for frail, aged and people with a disability to ensure that their basic needs were met.	Increasing the access to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meals on Wheels - shopping services - regular phone contact - provision of regular written information about COVID-19 and related restrictions. 	These programs have funded targets from the State and Federal Governments and approval to be flexible and provide alternate services was provided.
Social isolation and boredom experienced by community members.	Increased access to libraries through online memberships and resources and home delivery of books. Online offerings at Latrobe Regional Gallery and Latrobe Performing Arts.	New service delivery model for libraries focussing on online support and home delivery services. Redirection of program funds and resources to facilitate payments to artists and delivery of program. This program will be maintained ongoing.

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
<p>Confusing and inconsistent information from State and Federal Governments.</p> <p>Access to COVID-19 testing is limited, keeps changing locations, is not well promoted locally and results can take up to five days.</p>	<p>A local community Helpline provides direct and timely support to the community in relation to testing.</p> <p>Contact made with DHHS to request additional testing sites and ongoing promotion of information.</p> <p>Latrobe City Mayor will write to the Minister for Health raising the issues relating to testing, and requesting additional testing sites and associated resources.</p>	<p>Re-deployment of Council staff into Helpline roles.</p> <p>Fortnightly collation of local service system availability undertaken to inform the availability of services for residents.</p> <p>State Government is about to announce additional local testing opportunities and has announced that local health contact tracing teams have been established.</p> <p><i>The community feels anxious about not being able to easily access testing and about not knowing the town location of those tested positive as this information is publicly unavailable.</i></p>
<p>Ongoing financial and social wellbeing of residents.</p>	<p>0% rate increase for the 20/21 financial year.</p>	<p>Council forgoing over \$13 million in revenue over 10 years.</p>
<p>Increased risks of family violence.</p>	<p>No action taken by Council; Latrobe City service providers and the police identified families experiencing increased levels of risk of family violence (through their existing databases) and reached out to them.</p>	<p>The Federal Government's \$150 million Domestic Violence Support Package for 1800 Respect and Mensline Australia welcomed.</p>

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
<p>Community Groups and Sporting Clubs unable to meet, be active and unable to fundraise.</p> <p>Concern that many may not return to participate in clubs or groups due to COVID-19.</p>	<p>Specific Council Community Grants program established with relevant criteria to support groups and clubs with their operations.</p> <p>Council supporting community groups through providing information and advice on the requirements for reactivating groups – also working with peak bodies.</p>	<p>Additional budget allocation of \$500,000 above normal Community Grants and Sponsorship Program.</p> <p>Waiving of Council fees and charges for hire/access to key facilities.</p>
<p>Community concern for lack of and seemingly lax police checking of businesses, organisations and community members not adhering to COVID-19 restrictions. High impact on mental health and anxiety.</p> <p>Community concern about the number of people moving through or about Latrobe City to access work from restricted areas currently recording high levels of positive cases of COVID-19.</p> <p>Continuous changes to COVID-19 restrictions at State and Federal levels, border closures and permit requirements.</p>	<p>Police contacted when incidents reported and members of the public encouraged to report.</p> <p>Latrobe City Environmental Health team following up with some businesses regarding COVID-19 requirements.</p> <p>Advocacy to State Government.</p> <p>Latrobe City COVID-19 Helpline service extended for a period of months and direct engagement by officers with wide cross section of community to identify and monitor impacts.</p>	<p><i>No requirement currently for workers or those in permit categories to have regular tests for COVID-19 .</i></p> <p>Referrals made to local support services.</p> <p>Timely information provided through Helpline and shared widely.</p>

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
Community Groups unable to hold community events.	Latrobe City Community Events Grants able to be carried forward for a period.	Flexibility provided to Community Groups to support community connectivity through events once restrictions eased.
University students, especially international students, loss of part time work and access to income support.	Direct referrals from local services and community organisations to assist in provision of food and essential supplies.	Emergency relief providers and service sector positioned to assist. Latrobe City Trust Magistrates Court grant funds able to be accessed.

Local Business Impacts

In May 2020 Council undertook an extensive consultation to determine the initial COVID-19 business impacts (see Appendix 1). The second round of consultations was undertaken 3 weeks later in June 2020 to understand any changes in the impacts on business (see Appendix 2). As part of these processes, a total of 200 Latrobe City businesses were surveyed.

There were no significant changes identified from the first survey to the second. However, more businesses in the second round indicated that the biggest challenge that they have encountered was uncertainty in relation to not knowing when the restrictions will be removed, when businesses will get back to normal, how long the pandemic will last, and how long the business support packages from the Governments will keep their business going.

In accordance with these surveys, the sectors that have been severely impacted in Latrobe City are the accommodation and food, arts and recreation services, retail trade, and small private health and social services experiencing most significant impacts.

Industry sectors that have not been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic include agriculture and forestry, construction, transport and postal services.

COVID-19 has prompted some businesses to make changes to service delivery including online business pathways such as including telehealth, online classes, home based delivery, etc.

There have been further impacts following the Chief Health Officer’s reinstatement of Stage 3 ‘Stay at Home’ restrictions on Wednesday 8 July 2020 across metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire. While it has been beneficial for Latrobe City to remain outside of the restricted area, there have been flow-on effects to this region and its businesses.

Latrobe City accommodation providers particularly have been impacted, and have experienced a significant reduction in occupancy rates and a change in clientele, with virtually no corporate repeat client base remaining and most bookings made by locals.

Latrobe City Council has surveyed its accommodation businesses to have a better understanding of the impacts of the 8 July restrictions. A refund of bookings from ‘hot-spot’ areas (extended to Melbourne and Mitchell Shire) up to \$225 per night has been well received, however the issue is that holiday makers are mostly local and bookings are usually last minute. The refund of bookings from hot-spot areas need to have been made prior to 30 May 2020, resulting in most cancelled bookings being ineligible for this refund.

Anecdotally, some employers are not paying workers when they do get tested if they have to take time off because the paperwork is too onerous. This means employees may be required to utilise their annual leave. The process for employers accessing funds for workers who are being tested or have symptoms and have to stay home is too bureaucratic, and may result in the risk of workers not staying at home if they have symptoms and trying to mask their symptoms.

The key impacts on Latrobe business are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2: COVID-19 Impacts on Latrobe Business

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
In both surveys over 50% of local businesses reported being affected, with 51% reporting a reduction in turnover in the first survey and 65% in the second.	\$1.7 million Council business and community support package including fee and permit waivers.	JobKeeper initiative (37% Latrobe City businesses applied). Boosting Cash flow initiative (up to 17% Latrobe City businesses applied).

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
<p>Extreme impacts on Arts, Events and Tourism industries (including performers, ride operators, food and beverage suppliers, security and labour hire).</p>	<p>Council Officer support with business planning and training.</p> <p>Maintenance of arts and culture services for community, including direct paid engagement of artists to deliver programs from Latrobe City's key cultural services Latrobe Regional Gallery and Latrobe Performing Arts.</p> <p>Tourism campaign activity focused on encouraging local and regional patronage of local businesses as restrictions ease.</p>	<p><i>Business structures (e.g. sole/small trader) have resulted in many businesses being unable to implement JobKeeper.</i></p> <p>Direct funding to artists and creatives through the Australia Council and Regional Arts Victoria are welcomed</p> <p><i>Artists and creatives operating from the Latrobe Valley may not have capacity or structural access to secure funding in a competitive round – dedicated funds to more vulnerable communities would be helpful – this could be administered by local government cultural services.</i></p>

Impact on Council Services

Service closures and reduced attendance at some services have resulted in a significant financial impost to Council, with an estimated net reduced income impact of \$1.576 million by 30 June 2020.

The negative impact on revenue due to COVID-19 closures of Council's leisure services alone is forecast at \$1.035.046 (incl. caravan parks and outdoor pools) against the mid-year budget forecast.

In February and March of this year the impact on the Latrobe City community, particularly its local businesses became evident. In response Council adopted a range of support measures, designed to provide financial and non-financial support to the local business community and community groups.

These include:

- reduction of rent for tenants in Council owned buildings,
- refunds of street trading and outdoor dining permit charges,
- refunds of health registrations charges,
- provision of a waiver of rent or fees for sporting groups utilising Council owned lands/grounds and buildings, to name a few.

The impact of this short term support package equated to a further loss of revenue of \$161,492 in the 2019-2020 Council budget.

Council will also provide a Business and Community Support package for the 2020/2021 financial year to the value of \$1.729 million. The Business and Community Support and Recovery package included the supports listed above as well as waiving of some planning permit fees, business support vouchers, small business grants, support for business chambers of commerce, webinars, marketing initiatives and community support grants. Support for residents through a 0% rate increase in 2020/21 will have a net reduction in revenue of \$436,000 which equates to a total cumulative impact of \$4.004 million. Longer term financial impacts are expected to be to the value of \$13.13 million over 10 years.

Such projections in the loss of revenue will impact service delivery capacity into the future.

Where possible, many council services responded to this health crises in positive and creative ways to improve the wellbeing of our community.

For instance, Council’s library services broadened services and operated responsively under the Government restrictions. This involved:

- Calling over 900 members at home to provide community connection;
- Provision of reader advisory service – providing a vital link to members wishing to find certain material;
- Transforming programs/ activities into digital formats;
- Presenting/ connecting via video formats;
- Home library service extension to those who fitted the Government’s ‘at risk’ category, i.e. people aged 65 or over or otherwise vulnerable;
- Free books for the community, offered outside our libraries with regulated quarantining for health and safety;
- Storytime online – weekly pre-recorded videos of storybooks chosen by our librarians;
- Form Drop – to enable community members to deliver Council forms through library after hours book return chutes;
- Tech Help Call Back – to help customers with digital library use and access;
- Click, Call and Collect – for pre-ordered items in a range formats options, including books, DVDs, CDs, talking books, play aways, magazines etc.

There was initial confusion as to whether staff could continue to work in libraries when they were closed to the public. While this was eventually cleared as being a place of work, the wellbeing of volunteers was impacted due to their inability to attend.

The broader impacts on Council operations are included in Table 3.

Table 3: COVID-19 Impacts on Latrobe City Operations

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
Significant loss of revenue across Council services.	211 casual staff laid off.	<i>Local government is not eligible for JobKeeper.</i>

Issues	Council Actions	Enablers/ <i>Barriers (in italics)</i>
The dog attack investigations have increased by 47%, animal management requests have increased by 15%, and there has been 12% increase in animal infringements issued. The local laws requests for the traffic and compliance team have increased by 30.8%.	Multi-media campaigns reminding residents to walk dogs on leashes and other responsible pet ownership messages.	Council absorbed the cost of increased local laws staffing hours in response to demand.
Free childcare services resulted in \$425,672 reduced income.	Council continued to operate childcare throughout the pandemic absorbing the reduction in income.	<i>Ineligibility of local government to JobKeeper to cover the reduction in income. Thus this has to be absorbed by ratepayers.</i>
Increase in Council immunisation services.	April 2020: 191 people immunised compared to 68 in 2019. May 2020 252 immunised compared to 74 in May 2019.	New model of immunisation to accommodate social distancing. Council capacity to upscale to meet community need.

Recommendations

The Victorian Government's COVID-19 response could have been strengthened by:

- Recognition of the role of local government in supporting communities during pandemic responses.
- Greater consultation with local government to implement pandemic responses.
- Consistent messages from State and Federal Governments to reduce confusion and support individuals to remain safe and comply with regulations.
- Provision of specific non-competitive funding support to arts and cultural services, galleries and performing art centres in regional areas to engage artists in paid work.
- Nomination of libraries as essential services for the wellbeing of the community.

Appendix 1: Latrobe City Business Survey Results (Survey 1 – May 2020)

Table 1: Industry Categories Surveyed

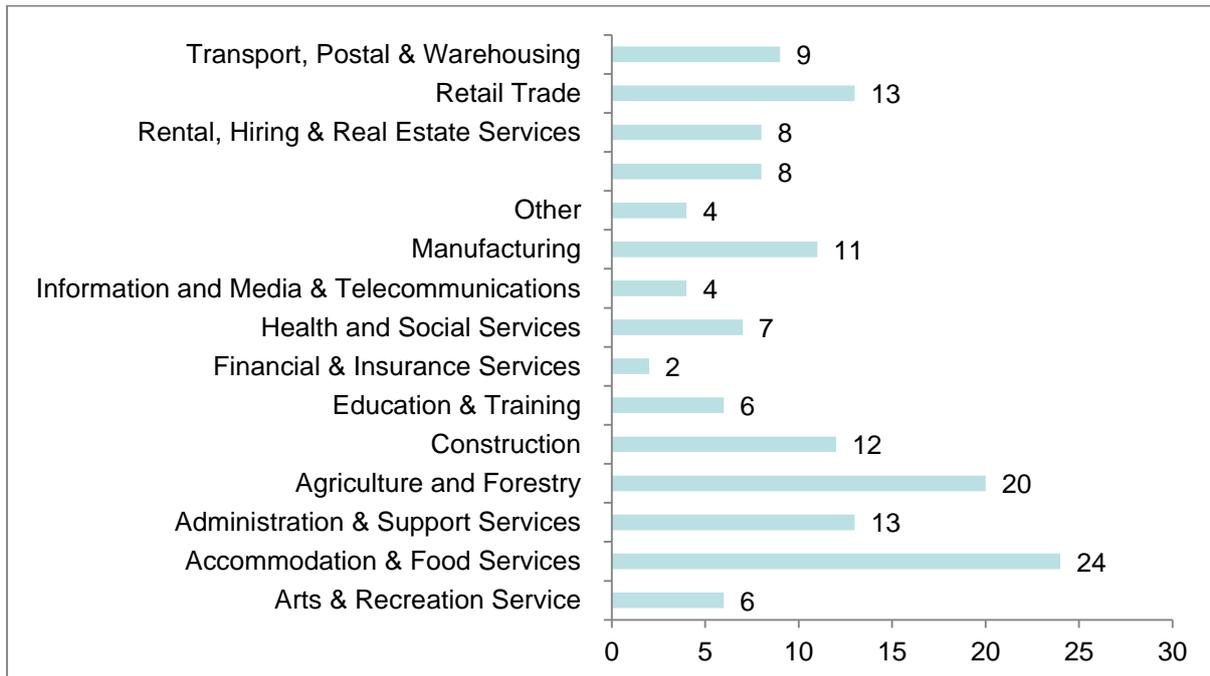


Table 2: COVID-19 Business Impacts

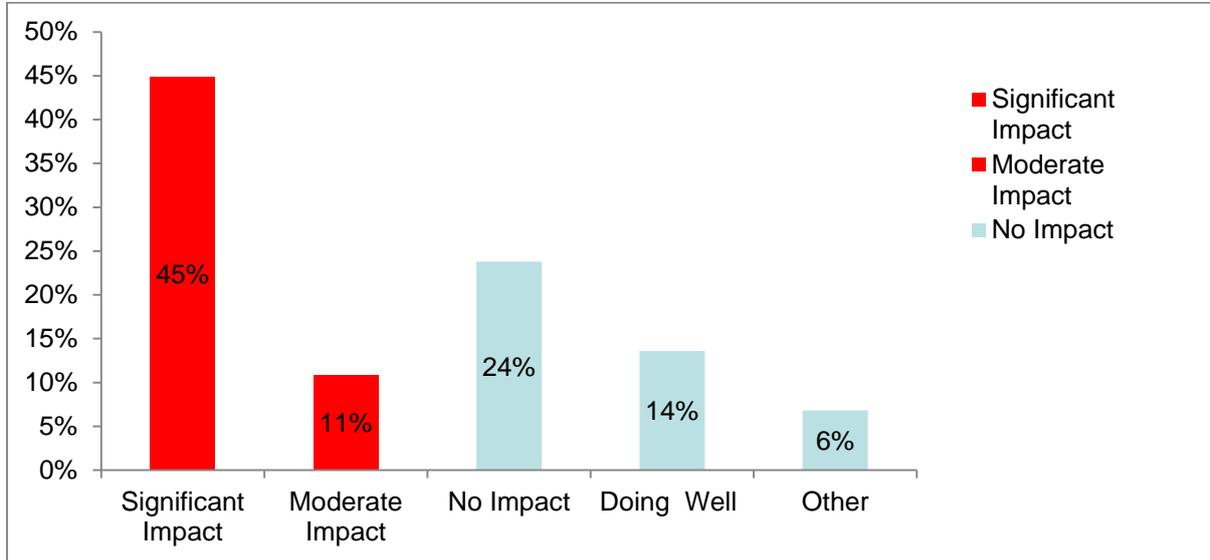


Table 3: Business Challenges Experienced Due to COVID-19

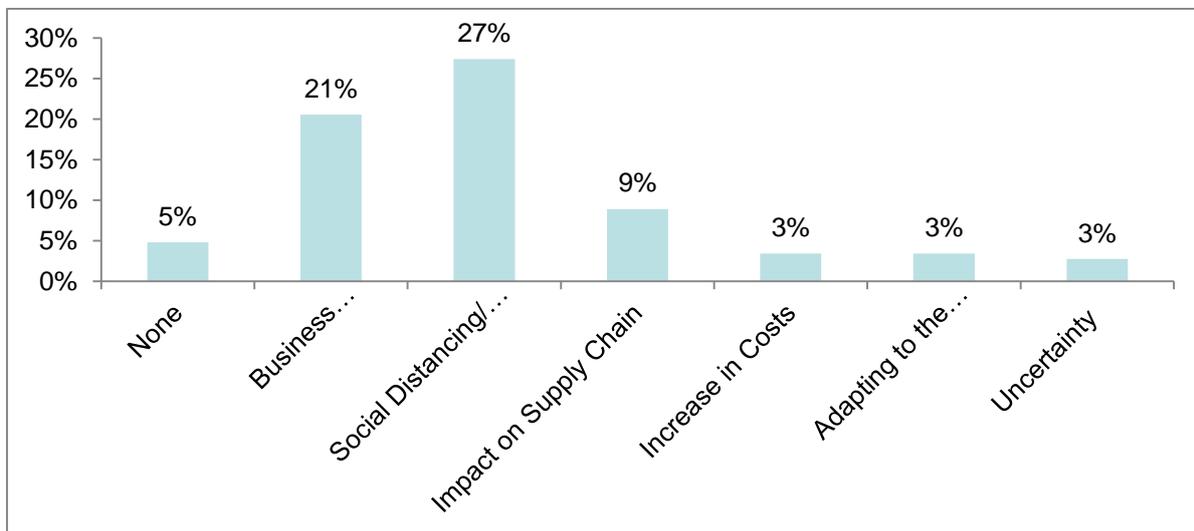


Table 4: Impact on Staff Retention (% of businesses that have put staff off)

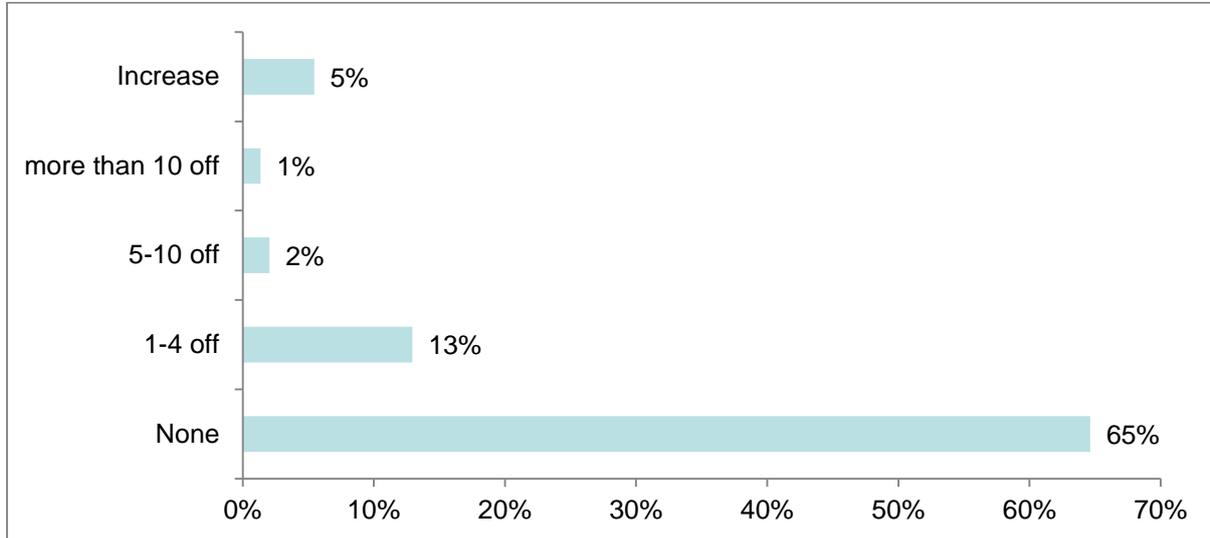


Table 5: Impact on Business Turnover

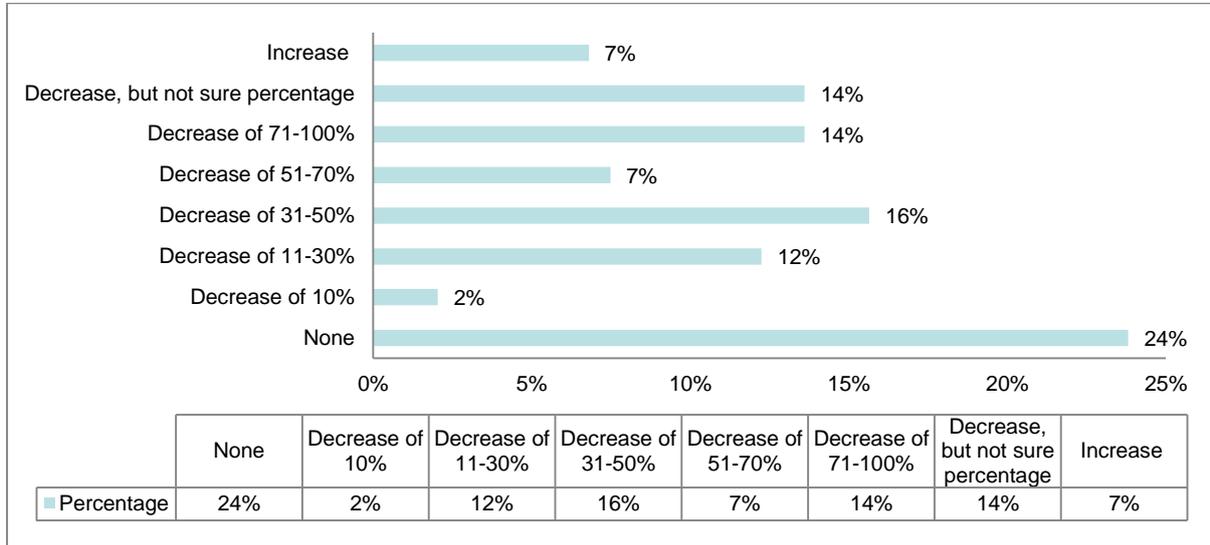
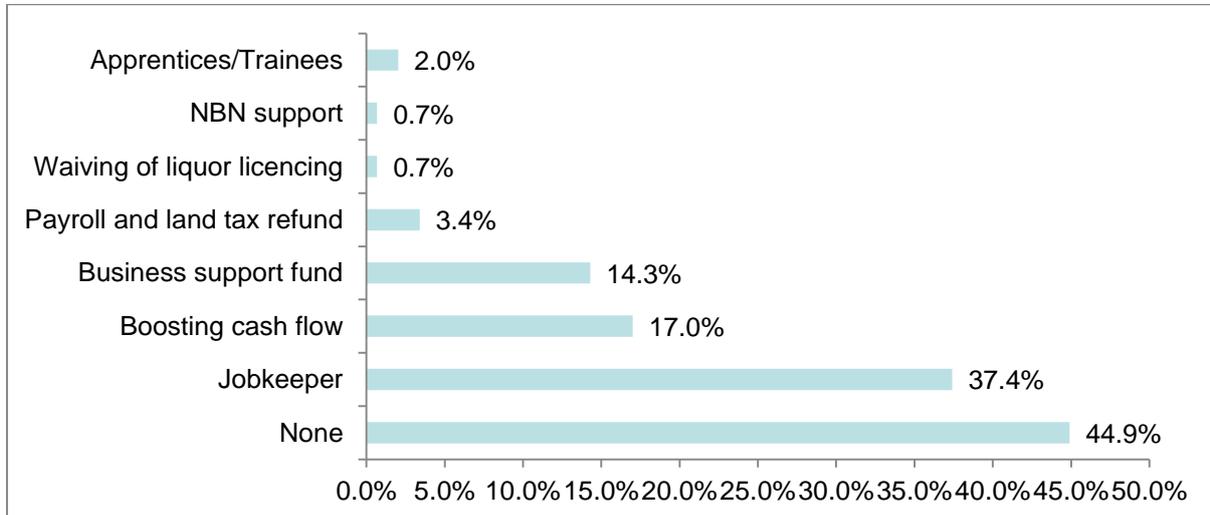


Table 6: Applications to State and Federal Business Support Packages



Appendix 2: Latrobe City Business Survey Results (Survey 2 - 2020)

Table 1: Industry Categories Surveyed

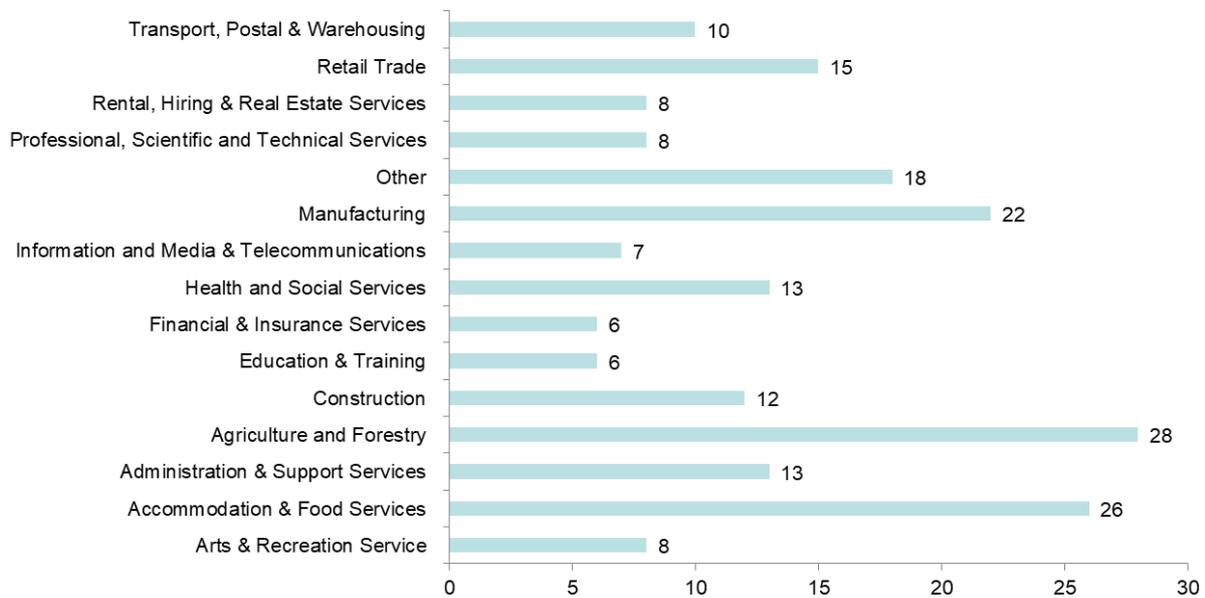


Table 2: COVID-19 Business Impacts

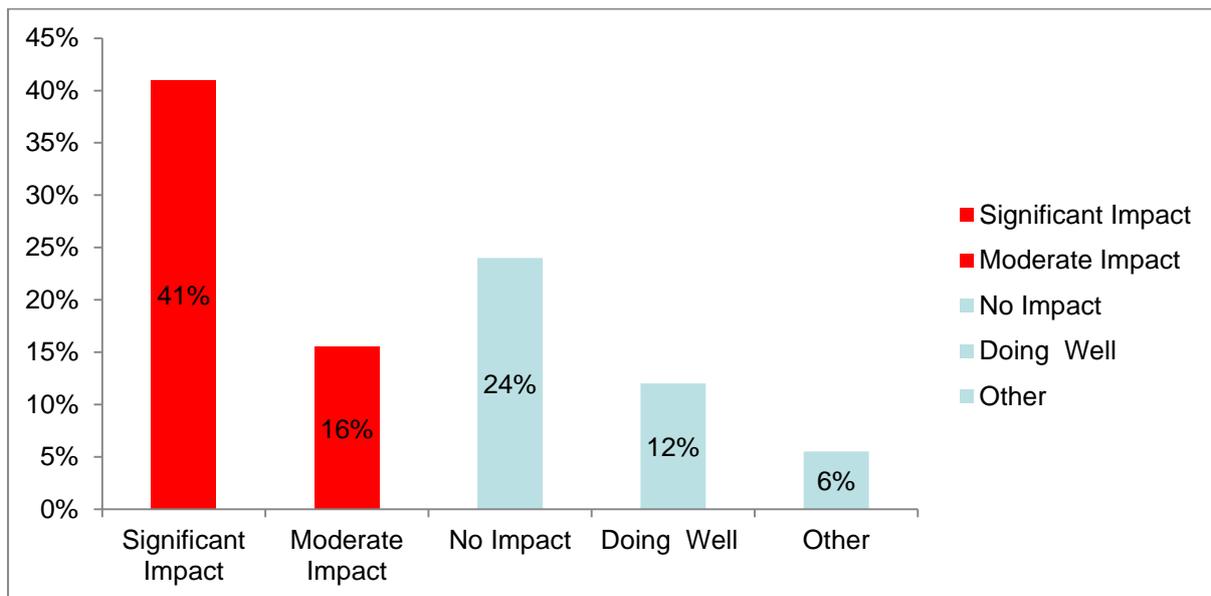


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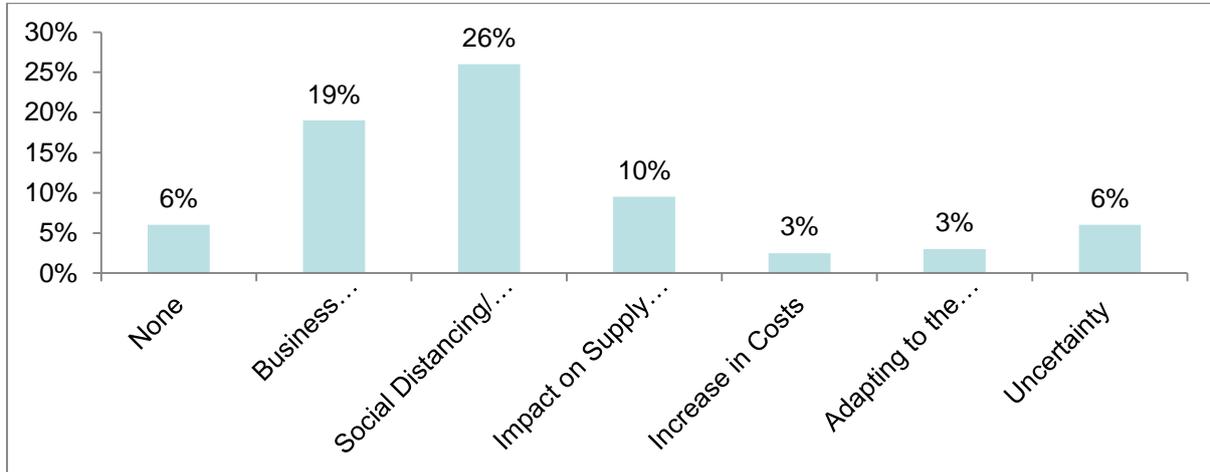


Table 4: Impact on Staff Retention (% of businesses that have put staff off)

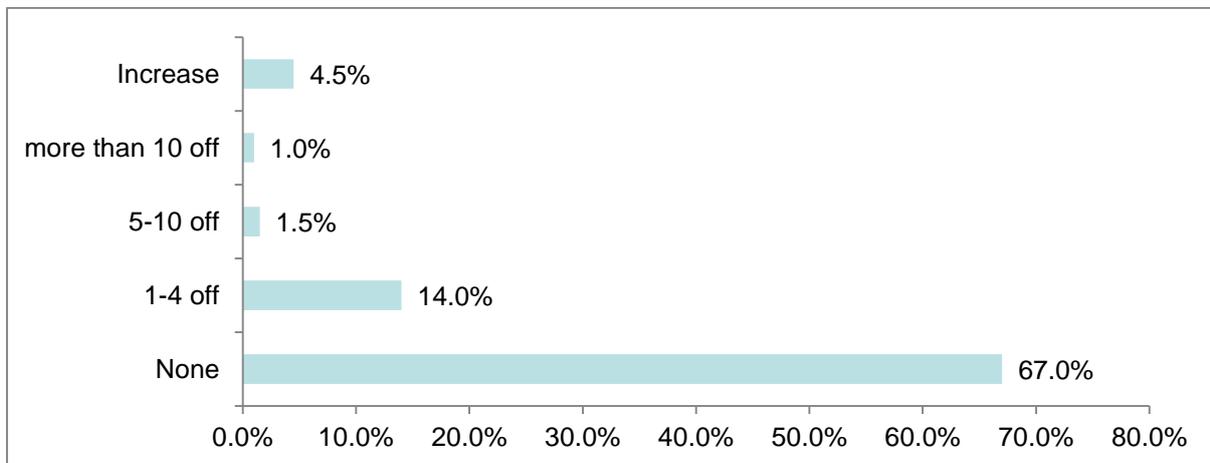


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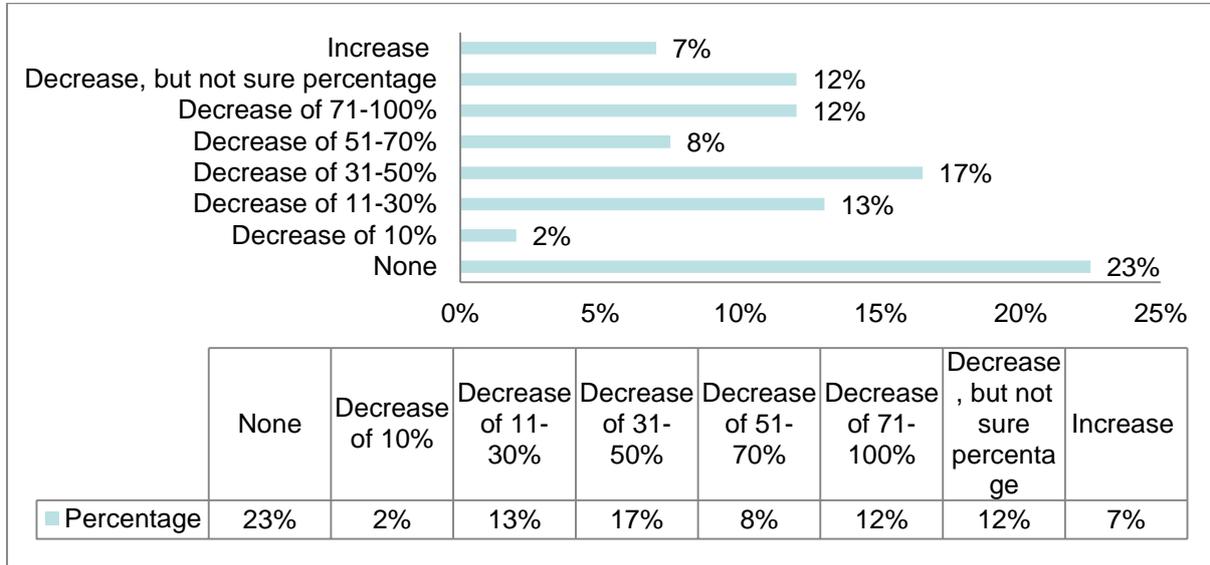


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