Six actions to get Sydney's events sector back on track



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Committee for Sydney



Introduction

The Sydney we know and love is roaring back to life. Vaccinated people can now get out and enjoy cafes, restaurants and pubs - with more outdoor dining areas, thanks to the NSW Government's Alfresco Restart Package – friends, family and visitors from across the state can now enjoy them with us too. But Sydney has so much more to offer than a nice meal out.

Events are a huge drawcard for Sydney. The roar of the crowd at a festival or a wave going round the ground at a game. The way a band playing a tiny venue can cut through it all, to the economic might of trade shows and international conferences. Events are a magnet for visitors, a big part of what makes Sydney a great place to live, and a springboard for some of our most powerful global ambassadors.

Event organisers have been among the hardest hit by Covid-19 controls. This is a sector that never got a chance to recover after the first wave of lockdowns in 2020. The impact was only compounded in 2021, and there is little sign of respite.

In some ways, we have been a victim of our success in vaccinating the population – we hit 85% vaccination on 25 October, the day we were projected to reach 70%, and again passed 90% well ahead of schedule - the rapid-fire update announcements have left this longlead industry scrambling to keep up.

Supporting the recovery of this crucial sector is vital to Sydney and the state's medium and long-term social, cultural and economic prosperity. To do that, organisers need support to take risks putting on events. Equally consumers need the confidence to attend events. Financial and regulatory support needs to be confirmed and put in place now.

We welcome packages and programs of support already announced by the NSW Government, including Stay & Rediscover and Dine & Discover vouchers, the CBDs Revitalisation program, the Rescue and Restart program, the Sydney Business Events Fund and the Festival Relaunch package, as well as proposed changes to the Codes SEPP - the 'Fun SEPP' - currently on exhibition.

However, there is more that can and should be done. In the following pages, we outline the importance of the events sector to Sydney and the huge pressure it faces. We make six key recommendations to support its reopening and recovery.

In preparing this paper, we consulted representatives of event organisers and touring companies, sporting codes, cultural institutions, hotels and hospitality businesses, and government, including small and large organisations representing operations across Greater Sydney.

Recommendations

- 1. Underwrite a reinsurance scheme covering communicable disease
- 2. Remove density limits and create a clear, consistent roadmap
- 3. Address labour shortages
- 4. Targeted payments and seed funding
- 5. Improve targeting of economic stimulus
- 6. Create a calendar of events with effective coordination of 1000+ scale events.



1. 32,000 gigs and events, equating to almost \$94 million income, were cancelled in Australia since 1 July 2021

2. The contribution of live entertainment industry to Australia's economy fell by 64% from 2019-2020

3. Over 79,500 jobs were lost in Australia's live entertainment industry in 2020

4. Tourism and hospitality sales in Greater Sydney fell by 19% to \$37.1 billion in 2020, from \$45.7 billion in 2019

5. Cancellation of business events represent an annual loss of up to \$35 billion in direct expenditure

SIX ACTIONS TO GET SYDNEY'S EVENT SECTOR BACK ON TRACK PG#4

Events are a huge drawcard for Sydney

Sydney's events provide a stage for artists, musicians, cultural leaders, businesses and athletes - and they give all of us the opportunity to experience the euphoria of shared triumph, the emotional power of great artistry, the sheer potential created in bringing people together.

They enrich and electrify our lives and our city in so many ways.

They make us feel good, they attract tourists, they create jobs and bolster the local and national economy, and they spur the innovation and ideas that power Sydney's knowledge economy.

There are countless studies to back up its value^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5}, but the most convincing proof can be found in each of our own personal experiences.

Covid-19 has crushed the events sector

For event organisers, repeated lockdowns have resulted in cancellations, job losses and in some cases bankruptcy.

While State and Federal Government crisis funding has been available, it has proven inaccessible for many artists⁶. Given long lead times in the sector, the industry is concerned about crisis support ending too early, leaving them with six weeks or more of immediate payroll liability.

For those in the arts and entertainment industry, the havoc Covid-19 wreaked is made worse by the already precarious nature of employment⁷.

Event organisers are facing severe labour and skills shortages being seen across the entire economy. This is partially due to the impact of border closures on international students and skilled migrants.

But it's also caused by deeper issues around the perception of events and hospitality roles as temporary jobs rather than long-term careers.

Between Sydney's two major lockdowns, restrictions and a lack of consumer confidence, many events have been unable to operate at full capacity or were cancelled all together.

As we reopen, the sector faces ongoing capacity constraints, the high risk of cancellation due to Covid-19 outbreaks, and weakened consumer confidence^{9,10,11}.





^{6.} A survey of 2000 artists found 67% were ineligible for the Federal Government Covid-19 Disaster Payment

^{7.} In Australia, 45% of people working in the arts are casuals with no leave entitlements.

^{9. 52%} of people say the risk of lockdowns is the greatest barrier to attending a live event

^{10. 62%} said they would attend events as soon as permitted

^{11.} International delegates don't think long-haul conferences will resume until 2022-2023

1. Underwrite a reinsurance scheme covering communicable disease

Promoters and organisers stepped up after the first lockdown with new events – organising food, staging, performers and the rest – only to be hit by a second round of restrictions. Some were fortunate – those with stable funding from government and other sources, or alternative channels including broadcast to offset event losses – but many head into late 2021 with shredded confidence.

Since early 2020, private insurers have removed the option to buy back 'communicable disease cover.' Without insurance to cover the cost of event cancellations caused by Covid-19 restrictions or outbreaks, programmers and venues are burdened with a financial risk that largely prohibits them from organising or hosting events. A survey by I Lost My Gig Australia found more than 32,000 gigs were cancelled between 1 July 2021 and 30 August 2021, with 99% having no income protection or event cancellation insurance.

In the UK and Europe, government-backed reinsurance schemes have been introduced to boost confidence and support the resumption of events. In Australia, the Victorian Government has been first to announce <u>Covid-19 Event Insurance</u>, which will cover creative, business, sporting and community events in Victoria that have to be cancelled (or have to run at reduced capacity) because of a State or Federal Government restriction due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2021, the Sydney Royal Easter Show received Letter of Comfort – a document that provides assurance that an obligation will be met – from the NSW Government, giving organisers the confidence to go ahead after it was cancelled in 2020. The event attracted more than 800,000 attendees – making it the biggest event in the world since the start of the pandemic. Without insurance, there were fears it would not have the money to return in 2022, if cancelled again in 2021.

An inquiry into the 'Live Performance Federal Insurance Guarantee Fund Bill 2021' is currently before a federal Senate committee, with a report due 19 November 2021. This bill provides an opportunity for the Federal Government to follow the lead of these other governments and support the reopening of the events sector. If this bill is to be approved, we would encourage its expansion beyond simply 'live performance' to include business events, sporting events and exhibitions at galleries or museums.

The NSW Government has also announced an Event Saver Fund – providing support to organisers if events are cancelled or disrupted due to any public health order – as part of its Covid-19 Economic Recovery Strategy. However, details on how this fund will work and what type of events it will cover are not yet available.

As event promoters often require national tours, or events in multiple states, to run viable event programs, we suggest the federal government should take leadership of a communicable disease cover scheme. While support from state governments is welcomed, it is important to have a nationally consistent scheme – so if the federal government does not deliver on this, ideally states will work together to develop a coordinated approach.

Action:

• Federal government to underwrite a reinsurance scheme covering communicable disease for all events. If not federal government, then state governments to work together to come up with a nationally consistent approach.

2. Remove density limits and create a clear, consistent roadmap

Events have long lead times, with planning and preparation taking place six, 12, 18 and more months in advance. Constant changes to the reopening roadmap have left organisers scrambling to keep up.

What the industry needs now is a sense of calm, with clarity and early engagement from the NSW Government on how and when decisions are made. This will be key to scaling up operations and planning for the future.

It's in everyone's interest to keep people safe from Covid-19, but where public health orders are put in place there needs to be a clear health rationale communicated, and consistency in application across sectors and across states. Along with this, industries need a clear roadmap of what restrictions will be eased, and when, after the 15th of December, or 95% double vaccination, whichever comes first.

If there are certain restrictions that the government does not intend to remove for the foreseeable future, this needs to be transparent. This roadmap should clearly articulate what conditions are required before certain restrictions are eased so that businesses can start to invest confidentially in events.

Capacity constraints are a key limiting factor for events. While some can generate enough revenue (or at least break even) with a 1 person per 2 sqm density limit, many cannot.

Image source: –



The news is good for events that are outdoors, ticketed and 100% fixed seated, or indoors, ticketed and 100% fixed seated – the NSW Government has announced that, from 8 November 2021, density limits no longer apply in these settings.

However, density and gathering limits will still apply for events such as music festivals, gigs at some theatres or pubs, art and museum exhibitions, and business conferences, with no date set for when they will end.

For organisers – with profit margins in the final 20-30% of ticket sales for many events – the 1 person per 2 sqm density controls severely limit viability of events being scheduled in late 2021/early 2022 and should be reduced quickly in line with vaccination milestones.

We suggest gathering limits are scrapped immediately for outdoor events, as they are prohibitively difficult for organisers to enforce, and there is little to no evidence of Covid-19 being transmitted outdoors.

It seems likely NSW will reach 95% double vaccination very soon. At writing, in NSW, more than 90% of the population aged 16 years+ have received two vaccines, and 94% have had at least one. As well, 70% of the population aged between 12-15 years have received two vaccines, and 80% have had at least one.

Maintaining a 1 person per 2 sqm density limit on indoor and outdoor venues after the state has reached 90% or 95% double vaccination seems to reflect a mentality that NSW can reach 100% double vaccination. However, the reality of reaching 100% double vaccination is as unlikely as reaching Covid-zero.

- NSW Government to create a detailed plan/roadmap for when and how all Covid-19 controls will be eased post 15 December 2021, or when 95% double vaccination is reached, whichever comes first.
- NSW Government to remove the 1 person per 2 sqm density limit for indoor and outdoor now, as the state has reached 90% double vaccination.
- Federal Government to commit to clear and consistent state border cross rules, e.g. borders must remain open after vaccination reaches 80% in each state.

3. Address labour shortages

The biggest challenge for the events and hospitality sector is labour. Organisers literally can't get enough people to reopen at full capacity or stage major events.

There are a number of causes:

- The loss of international students has reverberated across the sector. To put this in perspective, international students supported more than 95,000 full-time jobs in NSW before Covid-19, with a large portion of these in the hospitality and tourism industries. With borders shut, it's also been difficult to bring in skilled migrants, such as chefs.
- The precarious nature of work in this sector has been a factor for ٠ domestic workers - due to a high number of casual or selfemployed people – making it difficult for people to retain work during lockdowns. Exacerbated by job insecurity during lockdowns - too many stand-downs, deferred starts, dealing with rude patrons who don't want to check-in to a venue might be the last straw many who have transferrable skills have simply taken up jobs outside the industry.

The NSW Government's International Students Arrivals Pilot Plan (with Federal Government support) will return 250 international students a fortnight from December 2021. Should the pilot be successful, it will be expanded to a scaled return of international students in 2022. We suggest this pilot should commence as early as possible to help rebuild the NSW economy.

mage source: -



Normally, international student visa holders are limited to working 40 hours per fortnight in Australia. Recently, the <u>Federal Government</u> temporarily removed this limit for visa holders working in certain <u>industries</u>, including tourism and hospitality, health and aged care, and supermarkets – to help fill labour shortages during Covid-19 recovery.

The government has not detailed a timeframe for this temporary measure, but we suggest it should stay in place until at least 30 June 2022. We also suggest extending bridging visas for international students and non-residents until at least 31 March 2022, so they may continue to fill labour shortages while we reopen and recover.

But there is a more pervasive and long-term issue causing labour shortages in Australia's hospitality and tourism industries: Australians typically regard these jobs as temporary, rather than long-term career pathways.

<u>Training is also complicated by the great number of providers, as well</u> <u>as a range of regulatory and budgetary mechanisms</u>. While some training providers do a fantastic job, it's not consistent across the sector. The process for updating training courses should be streamlined to ensure courses remain up to date and relevant – currently market conditions and innovation occurs much faster than changes to the curriculum. These factors have served to deepen the labour shortage in the events sector, as staff switch to a more 'stable' or 'long-term' career.

Labour shortages and lack of business confidence make it hard for event organisers to want to invest, or to engage partners and contractors for set-up and installation or food and beverage services. Density limits are making this even harder as organisers cannot guarantee a certain level of foot-traffic at events, impacting their ability to contract food and beverage providers.

- International Students Arrivals Pilot Plan should be scaled up to full return of students as soon as possible.
- Federal Government to permanently relax restrictions on the number of hours student visa holders are allowed to work per week.
- Federal Government Department of Home Affairs to extend Covid-19 bridging visas until 31 March 2022.
- Federal Government Department of Home Affairs to allow international students to work more than 40 hours per fortnight until at least 30 June 2022.
- Ease international border restrictions as quickly as possible to allow Australians to return home, as well as people on working holiday visas.
- A campaign to increase the standing and careers pathways for events and hospitality professionals in Australia, along the lines of efforts to engage more students in STEM careers – Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment.
- Long-term reform is needed in the VET regulatory and funding system to provide uniform quality and regulatory frameworks supporting consistent standards across Australia – Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

4. Targeted payments and seed funding

Long lead times, insurance gaps, density limits and labour shortages all continue to impact revenue streams in the events sector despite reopening.

Parts of the industry face up to six weeks of immediate payroll liability with limited revenue, with the risk of further job losses and bankruptcy, unless financial support measures are extended. This is particularly challenging for small vendors, including creative producers and Indigenous providers.

Due to revenue shortfalls, individuals, particularly those who are casually employed, remain unable to get their regular hours of work back. If disaster relief payments do not continue, casual employees in the events sector will be forced to look for work elsewhere to make a living wage – compounding the sector's labour shortage and ability to reopen and recover. Keeping teams intact will be crucial to having the capability to scale up operations, and payments should be structured to help maintain ties between employers and their staff.

This period has also been devastating for the talented producers and artists who ignite our passions and so often become global ambassadors for Sydney and the state. There are countless cases of early career musicians and artists who having missed their big break are switching careers. There is increasing evidence that higher profile and more experienced creatives are being forced to compete with those earlier in their careers, pushing everyone back down the career ladder.

These kinds of moments are crucial in a creative career, in terms of media coverage and awareness among decision makers, making them critical for future opportunities. The risk for Sydney is that we lose a generation of creative talent.





One thing that's hard to quantify is the vital importance of events to other forms of creative production. If videos, social media, radio and streaming are seen as key to promoting music and art, the one aspect artists and businesses around artists have control over is their own performances in front of fans – particularly new and emerging performers. The impacts are seen in record labels repeatedly delaying releases and changing plans: disruption to the events sector has huge ramifications for the entire creative industries sector.

Compounding this, many major producers will be going with 'safe bets' as they attempt to lure audiences back after this tough period, making things even tougher for emerging creatives, with new work not being commissioned or booked.

If passed, proposed changes to the Codes SEPP, on public exhibition as the 'Fun SEPP', will help encourage smaller events in retail and hospitality premises, bolstering emerging artists.

One option is a 'venture capital fund for new creative work' – a tiered, highly targeted funding stream available to early or emerging creatives, those hitting their straps, and the crossover stars with the potential to reach national or global audiences.

The aim here would be to invest in new work, so it's ready and waiting when the stage is set. Create NSW's COVID Development Grants provide a good model for this, and should be expanded and replicated nationally, potentially in collaboration with organisations such as Support Act or Artist Benevolent Fund.

The Federal and NSW Governments have provided some support during the pandemic, including essential funding for art and cultural institutions that should be continued. In some cases, excellent programs should be reviewed to ensure they are working as planned; the RISE program, for example, excluded artist run spaces (which are often attached to an LGA ABN) by requiring they have their own ABN, and judged losses on ticket sales when many events run on different funding streams to box office.

- Federal Government to extend JobSaver / Disaster Relief Payments to states and territories until 31 December 2021 or until density limits end, whichever is last.
- Federal Government Office for the Arts to increase the RISE fund to a total of \$300 million, up from \$200 million, and ensure key sectors don't fall through the cracks. Government to decide if this requires an extension, currently set to end 31 May 2022.
- Federal Government Office for the Arts to offer three rounds of grant funding (with a total value of \$300 million), modelled on Create NSW COVID Development Grants. These should be for individuals and groups in the 'small-to-medium' sector.
- If density limits remain in place after 31 December 2021, Create NSW should extend the NSW Performing Arts Relaunch Package until one month after density limits are lifted.
- Create NSW to extend the Culture Up Late program until June 2022.
- Create NSW to restart the Live and Local Program through funding, particularly for former LGAs of concern.

5. Improve targeting of economic stimulus

Getting people back out to enjoy cafes, restaurants, pubs, museums and galleries, venues and theatres is essential to help the events and hospitality economy recover. We strongly support the NSW Government's announcement of an extra Dine & Discover voucher for NSW residents, as well as the expansion of Stay and Rediscover vouchers to include accommodation providers across NSW.

However, while these vouchers provide critical support to NSW businesses, they are a relatively blunt tool. In the transitional period out of lockdown, many businesses are reporting high demand Thursday-Saturday, and relatively low demand Sunday-Wednesday. This means the vouchers are in some cases being used for activities that would have happened anyway, rather than to boost these hard-hit operations where it would really help.

One option to support activation of Sydney mid-week would be to double the value of vouchers if used between Sunday and Thursday.

- Service NSW to offer two extra Dine and Discover vouchers, up from an extra one. The value of the vouchers should be amended to be worth \$25 if used between Friday-Sunday, and \$50 if used between Monday-Thursday, or, allow individual businesses to choose up to 72 hours of the week where the vouchers can be turbocharged for use at their premises.
- Service NSW to amend the value of the Stay and Rediscover vouchers to be worth \$50 if used between Friday-Sunday, and \$100 if used between Monday-Thursday.





6. Create a calendar of events with effective coordination of 1000+ scale events

As events restart in an uncertain and uneasy market, promoters and organisers need as much confidence as possible – and there is a risk that poorly coordinated events struggle to connect with audiences.

One way to boost confidence and support organisers to reopen is to help facilitate event coordination, so events don't cannibalise each other's audience, and so that Sydney is activated on many nights throughout the week, not just certain days. Destination NSW could support such coordination through their Get Connected Program. Importantly, event organisers need access to a pipeline of events, so that they're better able to plan and prepare.

As well as a pipeline and calendar, Destination NSW or the event organisers themselves could use that coordination process to create and offer multi-passes for people to buy one ticket that gets them access to 3-5 different events.

As part of the NSW Government's Alfresco Restart Package, local governments across Sydney will have the opportunity to activate their high streets with The Festival of Place Open Streets Program, the Festival of Place Summer Night Fund Program, Streets as Shared Spaces Program (Round 2), and the Long Summer Nights Program. We suggest these programs should become permanent features of Sydney.

Actions:

 NSW Government to facilitate event coordination between now and June 2022, potentially through Destination NSW. This should provide focused support for early movers in reopening the events sector (e.g. Cricket Big Bash, first major corporate events or conferences at ICC Sydney and so on).

- Service NSW to broaden the use of Discover vouchers to be redeemable for live music or theatre held in smaller venues like pubs or clubs.
- NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment to set up a permanent fund for local governments to create high street activation events up to three times a year, like the Festival of Place in Your Streets. All events should be included in Destination NSW's Event Calendar.



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