

Roundtable Summary – Council of Small Business Organisations Australia (COSBOA)

Date: Monday 24 June 2024

Hosts: Dr Angela Jackson, Panel Member, and Robyn Kruk AO, Panel Chair, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: This roundtable brought together a range of representatives from COSBOA and its membership to discuss the experience of small businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Purpose of this roundtable

- This roundtable presented an opportunity for a number of COSBOA members and affiliated peak bodies across different industries to reflect on what worked well during the pandemic and what could improve preparedness for a future pandemic.
- The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted small businesses, as they were more likely to be in industries most adversely impacted by public health measures. They were also less likely to have the resources to adapt their business models.
- There are lessons to be learnt on how economic and health measures affect small businesses and how communication with small business can be improved during a crisis.

What we heard at the roundtable

- Engagement between the Australian Government, COSBOA and other small business groups was generally positive.
- Peak bodies were an important conduit between government and industry during the pandemic. When governments consulted peak bodies, there was often greater levels of success. This relationship could be more deliberately leveraged by governments in the future to improve communication, as many small businesses relied on advice from peak bodies to understand how to access supports, such as JobKeeper.
- State and territory small business commissioners also played a valuable role in consulting across governments, which helped to give small businesses certainty as restrictions changed.
- Discrepancies in the public health orders between states and territories caused significant issues for small businesses in many industries. There was also a perception that some states and territories elected to take unique positions rather than work collectively and seek greater consistency, which could have improved clarity.
- Throughout the pandemic, there was confusion regarding the definitions of essential services and essential workers, as well as critical services and critical workers. The lack of clarity and consistency around important definitions and public health orders resulted in

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an increase in the number of sole traders operating in the cash economy in some sectors, such as hairdressing.

- Changes to workplace relations legislation helped small business employers react to work health and safety changes and workforce changes.
- There was a real impact in small businesses when an employee or business owner caught COVID-19. This was particularly difficult for self-employed people.
- Financial support was well-timed and rolled out relatively efficiently. Despite receiving less recognition than JobKeeper, Boosting Cash Flow for Employers was important for the small business sector, as was the Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements wage subsidy.
- Businesses and sole traders that were not incorporated and new businesses missed out on some of the financial support provided by governments. Similarly, many were unable to access support to compensate for the loss of ancillary income, which can be important to small businesses owners.
- It was suggested that financial support should be provided with clearer, more accessible financial counselling guidance on how to use the money during a crisis and the programs available to assist.
- Vaccine mandates were inconsistent and caused confusion.
- There are shared lessons between how Australia responded to COVID-19 and recent natural disasters that should inform plans for both moving forward.