

From: Jersey Kitchen <info@jerseykitchen.co.uk>
Sent: 18 February 2021 20:10
To: Scrutiny Communications <Scrutiny@gov.je>
Subject: Covid Response - Support For Business Feedback

To the members of the Scrutiny Panel,

I write in response to your recent advertisement requesting feedback from businesses with regards to the support that the Gvt has offered businesses during the Covid pandemic.

I run Jersey Kitchen Catering, a private, wedding and event catering company with my wife Helen. We normally have four full time and up to 40+ part time employees. We were a successful business with 34 weddings and 14 corporate bookings for 2020 (as well as numerous private catering events). With such a healthy order book and in order to facilitate much larger functions we re-located to larger, purpose built premises that resulted in a doubling of our previous rent, at the end of April 2020. Due to Gvt restrictions on gatherings we lost all bookings except for two small weddings.

On the 29th July 2020 myself, Rob Ritchie from Stage 2 Productions and Beverly le Queriot were invited to a meeting with Senator Lyndon Farnham and Deputy Richard Renouf as well as representatives for Treasury, Dr. Ivan Muscat and representatives from Jersey Business. The purpose of the meeting was to allow us as representatives of the Event Industry to explain to Government how the the pandemic had impacted specifically on our industry and for Government to explain their rational behind decisions being made with regards to restrictions on numbers at gatherings.

The conclusion of the meeting was the unanimous agreement that the Events and nightclub industry urgently needed financial help (supplementary to the co-funding payroll scheme) to see it through the enforced closure of business. We left the meeting feeling very positive that our message had got through to Government and extremely relieved that a financial package of support would be formulated. We worked closely with Jersey Business to provide all the relevant information requested by Government to formulate a support package. And then we heard nothing.

Numerous emails, calls and requests for interventions and updates via Jersey Business yielded no progress. I was told by Senator Farnham that there was an internal "disagreement" between the Government Officers and him as to the level of support the Government were prepared to offer.

It was not until three months later in October 2020 that we learnt that an unprecedented Ministerial Order had been signed by Senator Farnham to force through the allocation of funds for a support package, the contents of which were eagerly awaited.

This (VEAS) scheme was eventually released nearly three months later on the 5th January. The onerous criteria required to qualify for support meant that 90%+ (based on a JHA survey) of our industry were not eligible to apply for the support package. Devastating.

When the "Hospitality Circuit Breaker" was announced in December a new support package (Fixed Cost Support Scheme) for the hospitality sector was announced within days. (One must question the speed in which this Hospitality directed package was rolled out versus the Event directed VAES scheme took to produce).

We were given advance details of the content of scheme and could not quite believe the omissions and deductions that it contained, specifically that the new scheme would not be backdated to September / October

as per the first VEAS scheme and that depreciation of equipment had also been removed. We requested an urgent meeting with Lyndon Farnham and the Treasury department to explain the rationale behind the scheme. We met via a Teams meeting on Thursday 4th February.

When I asked why the new scheme would not be backdated as per the first scheme I could not quite believe the answer that I got from Treasury or indeed the tone in which it was delivered. "It was not a good use of tax payers money to backdate the scheme" and that as our Industry "had survived 'so far' there was no need to backdate". I am hoping that your panel might understand just how devastating it was to be treated in such an off hand, derogatory and quite frankly arrogant manner by civil servants. I was not looking for any sort of sympathy, merely an understanding of the hardship that we have all faced.

I was so incensed at such a response and pointed out very bluntly that had they actually pulled their fingers out and delivered a package in a timely manner (as directed by a Government Minister) then we would not have a need to request any backdating as the support package would have (and should have) already been in place.

For unbeknown reasons I am convinced that there is an absolute determination from within the Treasury Department and Government Officers not to provide a suitable, meaningful and adequate financial package of support for our specific event led industry and furthermore there has been a deliberate attempt to delay the release of any support package.

The clearly belligerent attitude that has been directed towards an industry that they have absolutely no desire to try to understand has led to two financial schemes that are not fit for purpose and the "our way or the high way" stance that has been taken by officers has led to a wedge being firmly driven between us and Government.

Ours was the first industry that was forced to close, that has remained closed throughout the year and ours will be the industry that will be the last to re-open with (unlike hospitality) no start date in sight for the foreseeable future.

We have had to endure all of the fixed costs of business whilst not being permitted to generate income.

Hospitality is thankfully re-opening next week and businesses have reported excellent pre-bookings. Our industry remains closed for business and STILL we have no support.

Unlike the hospitality sector we cannot simply 'open up our doors' when permitted and expect to instantly trade again. Events are planned sometimes years in advance and to date I have unfortunately had numerous weddings and corporate events cancel for this year already as there is just too much uncertainty over travel restrictions, numbers allowed to attend events and the rollout of vaccinations to the younger generation. This lost business cannot be replaced at short notice so we are facing a very, very bleak year yet again.

It is the misunderstanding by Government Officers and Treasury of how our industry works that is so frustrating and I would challenge absolutely anyone not to agree with me. The evidence is clear to see. Two ill thought out support packages that are not fit for purpose for us and I would even go further to say that our industry has been discriminated against when compared to the hospitality sector and the hotel sector, both of which are in receipt of meaningful support packages with much more realistic qualifying criteria.

The Government has in my opinion an absolute moral, social as well as a financial responsibility to help the Industry that it is has forced to close but instead they choose to play chess with our livelihoods, our businesses and our mental wellbeing.

I have nothing but the utmost respect for Senator Farnham who has fought tirelessly on our behalf and who importantly has real world experience of running a business but I also feel nothing but contempt for the Government Officers who have designed two schemes that are not fit for purpose.

It is these officers who are never in the spotlight, who do not attract any media attention or make public comment who are the real gate keepers as to whether a scheme is delivered or not. Without their willingness to understand, acknowledge and accept the true plight of our industry I am saddened to say that I have little to no faith of receiving any meaningful support.

Prior to our Teams meeting with Government and officers on the 4th February we requested that the meeting was recorded. Senator Farnham and officers agreed to our request on the condition that the recording was not circulated to anyone other than the event and nightclub stakeholders group and the meeting was indeed recorded by Tracy Maurant. After the meeting the stakeholders were pretty stunned at the inflammatory words used by officers. We requested a copy of the meeting in order to check exactly what had been said to us. To date we have requested a copy of this meeting no less than four times with absolutely no response. Yesterday we eventually received a link to the meeting which led to a "the video cannot be found - the content may have been removed" message. We immediately requested a working link but have not received a response. Hardly "Open Government" wouldn't you agree?

My message to Government is simple. You and your officers have acted shamefully in your inability and unwillingness to offer meaningful support for our Industry.

Yours sincerely,

Tony & Helen Sargeant