
SUPPLIED IN CONFIDENCE TO THE NSW I.C.A.C.

[Service NSW 2021 COVID-19 Micro Business Grant]
‘Retrospective Clawback and Extortion Scam’

[2022 - present]



Witness Personal Account and Victim Impact Statement

[Complainant #28g: ‘Steve Ridd’, Nature Trail]

The following written evidence received from Steven Ridd by email to steve@naturetrail.com.au .

[Emails (most recent at top)]

START OF EVIDENCE



Tel: [REDACTED]
Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, Australia
Wistmans Wood Trust trading as Nature Trail
www.naturetrail.com.au
ABN 51 965 308 493

Wednesday 7th February 2024

Mr Greg Wells
Chief Executive Officer
Service NSW, Department of the Government of New South Wales
Level 2, 66 Harrington Street
THE ROCKS NSW 2000

Dear Mr Wells,

RE: MY FORMAL COMPLAINT #2 AGAINST SERVICE NSW 2021 COVID-19 GRANT 'AUDIT'

Grant Title:	2021 COVID-19 Micro-Business Grant
Service NSW Reference number:	COL-8718f31-MBS
Grant Applicant:	Nature Trail (a Blue Mountains Tour Operator since 2019)
Application Lodgement date:	2021-08-01
Grant Approval date:	2021-08-11 (ten days later)
Grant Payment period:	2021-08-11 to 2021-12-10 (by a total of 12 instalments)
So-called 'audit' period:	2023-04-11 to current [Service NSW "temporarily pausing" since 17 Nov 2023]

1. I refer to my formal complaint letter dated 16th April 2023 (copy attached) against Service NSW so-called 'audit' addressed to you as Chief Executive Officer, Service NSW, Level 2, 66 Harrington Street, THE ROCKS NSW 2000.
2. I note receipt of a reply, not from you, but instead from Karen Ballantyne, "A/ Director, Business Customer Service", Service NSW dated 19th May 2023 (copy attached). Ms Ballantyne failed to address the specifics of my formal complaint, notably that Service NSW emailers have wrongly and despicably accused me of fraud from day one of this so-called 'audit', even before I had a chance to supply the extra records they have sought from my business.

3. Ms Ballentyne in her reply, proceeded to reiterate the **2021 COVID-19 Micro-Business Grant** Guidelines and its Terms and Conditions to me, of which I was/am fully familiar with and complied with at the time of my grant application lodgement on 1st August 2021.
4. In her reply email, Ms Ballantine did not want to deal with my audit case, instead referring me back to someone called 'Nicole' who I had been corresponding presumably with a staff member of Service NSW in its audit matter, yet not at any time did 'Nicole' provide a title, or contact details.
5. In good faith I continued to correspond by email with 'Nicole' as instructed by Ms Ballantyne. However, I point out that I have many different people contact me in this matter claiming to be from Services NSW, namely, in order: (1) 'Jacinta' (2) 'Angela', (3) 'Sam', (4) 'Nicole' and (5) 'Dewey'; none of whom has once provided their full name, nor their position title, nor contact details. They each come across to me doing what anonymous scammers do. Phone and email scamming is rife these days! I attach my email record of some 17 email replies to Service NSW dated between April and June 2023, which was the period of the audit being initiated by Service NSW to Nature Trail.
6. I have made clear to each caller and emailer that do not accept incoming phone calls which require me to provide personal information to identify myself. This is the tactic of scammers that Service NSW wrongly considers policy. It is a highly inappropriate practice by any government agency.
7. I have provided all the documentation that each of these emailers has requested, and more. It is clear to me that none of these emailers has a grasp of tax reporting nor of accounting, nor of the grant guidelines and terms and conditions, let alone trust tax reporting, as the Australian Tax Office requires from my business structure.
8. My experience in dealing with Service NSW is that the personnel (employees or contractors) are quite incompetent and accusatorial. They seem to be treating each grant applicant with the one-size fits all tar brush approach. Nature Trail was a new business in late 2019 (before the bushfires, landslips and pandemic), so it satisfied special criteria different to pre-existing businesses. Each caller/emailer seems to be isolated from the records I have already provided to Service NSW, and working from home and not communicating my previous supplied information with one another. They come across to me not as staff at Service NSW office but as outsourced debt collectors on commission.
9. I refer to my immediate subsequent email correspondence with 'Nicole' of Service NSW Micro Business Grant so-called 'audit'. I provide a copy of merely one extract of considerable email correspondence I have had with Service NSW in this matter. This just my emails to one of Service NSW provided email addresses (see attached).
10. In addition, I have received emails purporting to come from Service NSW:
 - A. smallbusinessassistance@service.nsw.gov.au
 - B. ServiceNSW@service.nsw.gov.au
 - C. ServiceNSW@gemailserver.com
 - D. no-reply@service.nsw.gov.au
11. The most recent email I have received from Service NSW is dated 17 November 2023, (copy attached). That email I consider to be ambiguous and so confusing.

It states that:

“This email is to let you know that Service NSW is temporarily pausing compliance audit activity in relation to your grant application. This means that no further action is required from you at this time.”

“The pause will allow us to review the audit process and identify options to help make it easier for micro-business owners to participate. We will contact you again at the conclusion of the review to update you on next steps.”

“If you prefer to continue with the current compliance audit process, you are able to do so, and our assessors remain available to support you. If you would like to continue the compliance audit, or to discuss your grant application with us, please respond to this email or call us on 13 77 88 to book an appointment with an assessor.”

12. I have complained about this limbo status to my local NSW Member for Blue Mountains, The Hon. Trish Doyle, who has written to the relevant minister for Service NSW communicated ich has written twice to The Hon. **Jihad Dib** MP, Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government (Service NSW). The first letter is dated 4th May 2023. The second letter is dated 21st November 2023 raising the problem of this indefinite limbo status.
13. Finally, I hereby notify you as CEO of Service NSW and relevant ministers in the Minns Government, that in my view this ‘audit’ has gone on far too long (since April 2023, which is approaching one year.
14. The 2021 Micro Business Grant was approved to my business on 11 August 2021, two years prior and after 10 days assessment with checks made to me during the assessment process. It was not automatically approved, as the callers and emailers falsely claim.

I have supplied every record asked of me by Service NSW in this matter.

IF ANY DOCUMENT IS REQUIRED OF ME THEN SPECIFICALLY INFORM ME IN WRITING, AND I SHALL EMAIL IT TO CDEO GREG WELLS AT SMALLBUSINESSASSISTANCE@SERVICE.NSW.GOV.AU IMMEDIATELY .

OTHERWISE, I CONSIDER THIS AUDIT MATTER TO BE CLOSED AND I DEMAND WRITTEN CONFIRMATION FROM SERVICE NSW TO THIS EFFECT BY THE END OF FEBRUARY 2024, AFTER WHICH I SHALL DEEM ANY FURTHER CORRESPONDENCE FROM SERVICE NSW ON THIS MATTER TO BE HARASSMENT AND INTIMIDATION – AKIN TO THE ILK OF A ‘ROBODEBT’ MARK 2. I SHALL REFER SUCH TO MY SOLICITOR.

Attached Documents:

ATTACHMENT 1: (Dated Apr-Jul 2023) Nature Trail’s **email record** with Service NSW regarding the bushfire grant and the pandemic grant (17 emails);

ATTACHMENT 2: (Dated 11-Apr-2023) Service NSW's 'Angela' **initial audit email** to me unsubstantiated default accusation against me somehow of grant fraud;

ATTACHMENT 3: (Dated 16-Apr-2023) **My Formal Complaint #1** to Service NSW CEO Greg Wells;

ATTACHMENT 4: (Dated 4-May-2023) NSW Member for Blue Mountains, The Hon. Trish Doyle's representative letter #1 to The Hon. **Jihad Dib** MP, Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government (Service NSW);

ATTACHMENT 5: (Dated 23-Jul-2023) Reply letter from The Hon. **Jihad Dib** MP, Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government (Service NSW) back to The Hon. Trish Doyle;

ATTACHMENT 6: (Dated 22-May-2023) Copy of Service NSW reply email by Karen Ballantyne, A/ Director, Business Customer Service on behalf of Greg Wells;

ATTACHMENT 7: (Dated 17-Nov-2023): Service NSW email to me RE: "**temporary pausing of compliance audit**" by 'Dewey';

ATTACHMENT 8: (Dated 21-Nov-2023) NSW Member for Blue Mountains, The Hon. Trish Doyle's representative letter #2 to Jihad Dib. (No reply yet received).

Sincerely,

Steve Ridd B.Bus (Mgt), Commercial Helicopter Pilot, Coxswain, Guiding Cert 4, Outdoor Rec Cert 3 + Dip.
Tour Director, Tour Guide, Local Historian

Copied Parties:

CC: The Hon. **Jihad Dib** MP, Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government (Service NSW)
bankstown@parliament.nsw.gov.au

CC: **Karen Ballantyne**, A/ Director, Business Customer Service, Service NSW
smallbusinessassistance@service.nsw.gov.au

CC: The Hon. **Courtney Houssos**, MP, Minister for Finance /Revenue NSW
<https://www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/ministers/minister-for-finance-natural-resources-domestic-manufacturing-and-government-procurement>

CC: The Hon. **Daniel Mookhey**, MLC, Treasurer of New South Wales
<https://www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/ministers/treasurer>

CC: The Hon. **Christopher Minns**, MP, Premier of New South Wales
<https://www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/premier-of-nsw/contact-premier>

CC: The Hon. **Trish Doyle**, MP, NSW Member for Blue Mountains
bluemountains@parliament.nsw.gov.au

CC: My solicitor - Mr **Raj Srikanthan**, Managing Director, Benetatos-White , Katoomba.

End of Letter

End of supplied evidence

This document submitted by Steven Ridd, Managing Director, Wistmans Wood Holdings Pty Limited [ACN 600 331 931] as trustee for Wistmans Wood Trust [ABN 51 965 308 493] trading as Nature Trail. Registered Address: 5 Kundibar Street KATOOMBA NSW 2780.]

By email icac@icac.nsw.gov.au

ICAC

INDEPENDENT COMMISSION
AGAINST CORRUPTION

Level 7, 255 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, New South Wales
Australia