



Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

By email

23 September 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

On 8 September, the DCMS Committee took evidence from representatives of some of our leading theatre companies, festivals and performance venues. Their message was clear: getting venues back open with fuller audiences is imperative to stop these vital pillars of our cultural sector from collapsing.

At a time of rising COVID-19 cases and new restrictions, and the decision to halt the return of crowds to sports stadia, we recognise that this will not be achieved immediately. However, there is a clear need and opportunity for the Government to develop a robust action plan to enable the safe return of audiences at capacity once the country emerges from this second wave.

The cultural sector contributed £32.3 billion to the UK economy in 2018 but, as we outlined in our July report on the impact of COVID-19, social distancing of audiences is simply not viable for many parts of it. That is why the Government needs to work with the sector to find safe, affordable ways for audiences to return in larger numbers. We are concerned that Government plans rely too heavily on the hope that a vaccine to enable the safe return of live audiences and sports crowds will be developed in time to make a difference.

The next few months will be crucial to ensuring both the cultural and sporting sectors are able to recover from this crisis: even if venues and stadiums cannot reopen with fuller audiences immediately, the Government must explore innovative solutions now, so that they are equipped to do so as soon as the public health situation allows.

[Stage 5 date for reopening](#)

We have heard strong calls for greater clarity and warning about when venues will be permitted to reopen with full audiences—stage 5 of the Government’s plan. Rebecca Kane Burton, CEO of LW Theatres, told us:

We need the time to plan. We cannot switch on theatre like a tap. You need three, four, five months’ planning minimum to even get shows staged. [...] We need that conditional reopening date as soon as possible to let us plan and reopen and get this part of the economy back up and running.

Lucy Noble, Artistic Director of the Royal Albert Hall, told us the Proms had already missed out on audiences due to a lack of notice:

The reason why we do not have audiences [for the Proms] is because the announcement to say we could have a socially distanced audience with a performance took place on the day when we were allowed to have performances with socially distanced audiences [...] you need months to remobilise.

Lucy Noble told us that “any date would be better than nothing” because it would enable organisations and producers to plan with a degree of greater certainty than they have now; however, we recognise that the public health situation is rapidly evolving and that it is not in the Government’s gift to guarantee when it will be safe for performance venues to reopen at full capacity.

Yet even if the Government cannot provide a putative target date at this time of rising cases, there is still more DCMS can be doing to provide the clarity necessary in enabling the sector to prepare: for example, what public health conditions will be required for stage 5 reopening to happen, or what safety measures venues will be required to have. Rebecca Kane Burton told us:

our belief—and what we would like to develop with Government—is that there should be a baseline of four, five or six measures that every single venue across the UK can undertake. [...] I think what would be helpful from Government is complete clarity on what the baseline measures are.

We repeat our call for DCMS to publish a ‘no earlier than’ date for stage 5 of its plan to reopen performing arts venues. This should be done as soon as practicable, as the progress of the virus allows, and with at least 3 months’ notice to enable these sectors to remobilise. In the meantime, we call on DCMS to provide greater clarity on those aspects more within its in control. In particular, it should set out clear guidance about the public health conditions that would enable stage 5 reopening, and the safety, hygiene and testing measures that will be required in venues for audiences to return without social distancing.

[Government co-ordination on safety and mass testing](#)

We will be more likely to get to stage 5 of the plan to reopen venues if the development, testing and implementation of public health measures to mitigate the need for social distancing was a higher priority for Public Health England. We were concerned by Rebecca Kane Burton’s observation that the pilot event at the London Palladium presented the “challenge” of “Public Health England not being prepared to look at mitigations with us and us wanting to very much do that work with them.”

The Prime Minister and Health Secretary have stated that mass testing could facilitate the return of audiences prior to the development of a vaccine. However, we are concerned that Government action on this has been slow and un-coordinated. Melvin Benn, Managing Director of Festival Republic, told us that back in June:

I presented the plan to the DCMS, who felt it was too big for it to deal with and that it needed to be dealt with by the Department of Health. I presented it to the Department of Health, who said, “We are in the middle of a pandemic. You need

to present it to the DCMS". They were in the middle of a pandemic and was it difficult for them to be dealing with it, but it should not be any longer.

The Government's 'Operation Moonshot' could have got under way much earlier had co-ordination between DCMS, other Departments and Public Health England been better. We recommend that DCMS uses its convening power to ensure the interests and expertise of the performance and event sectors contribute to the Government's work on mass testing programmes, and that those sectors are closely consulted regarding any resulting mass testing frameworks.

Support for venues

Putting the necessary safety and testing measures in place to enable the return of audiences at capacity will cost, at a time when the majority of arts organisations have faced a complete collapse in revenue. For example, we were told that the fogging system used at the London Palladium costs £7,000 a month: this is simply not viable for the vast number of venues across the country. It is a similar picture across the sports sector: while the Premier League might be able to afford the private testing regime that has enabled it to restart, this is not an option for most clubs or other disciplines.

We welcome the fact that the £1.57 billion Culture Recovery Fund will help some organisations to remain open or restart their operations; however, we note from the guidance that this is limited to "activity compliant with the Government's Stage 4 performing arts re-opening plans, and is in line with current social distancing measures". We share Lord Lloyd-Webber's concerns that this demonstrates a lack of ambition on the Government's part to equip venues with the technical and safety measures to reopen at capacity. Furthermore, this fund will only support certain organisations until March 2021: if the current restrictions are likely to remain in force for six months, what will happen after this date?

Rebecca Kane Burton told us that "there is a big job to be done to reassure audiences that they can come back" to live performances: this will be even more important as time goes on. 'Eat Out to Help Out' successfully encouraged people back to our hospitality sector: the arts will need something similar. While opening with social distancing, for example, Lucy Noble encouraged Government to consider "a subsidy on the spare seats that [venues] are not able to fill."

Further funding will be needed to equip venues to reopen at full capacity, and even before this point Government should introduce sector-specific schemes to make it economical for venues to reopen and to encourage audiences back when it is safe to do so.

The consequences of failing to act

Earlier this month, I called on the Chancellor to extend the furlough scheme for the arts and leisure sectors that are unable to reopen at full capacity due to Government restrictions. Otherwise, the arts face an imminent end to workforce support measures, while the emergency financial package for cultural institutions is not sufficient to secure their long-term viability or workers' livelihoods. At the same time, venues don't know when they will be permitted to reopen or what safety measures will be expected of them to reopen. As a result of not being able to plan, we can expect closures of arts venues and

organisations across the country, further redundancies and skilled freelancers leaving the workforce.

Lord Lloyd-Webber was clear that the theatre sector is “at the point of no return” and Rebecca Kane Burton told us “the industry is haemorrhaging people”. Likewise, leading sports organisations are warning of dire consequences for their sectors. Government must do more, now, to secure the future of our rich cultural and sporting traditions.

As other pressing issues raised in our report, such as the need for adequate insurance for the performing arts, remain, we look forward to receiving your Department’s response imminently. We would also be grateful for your response to this letter by 9 October, and look forward to exploring these issues further when you give evidence to us on 14 October.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Julian Knight', written in a cursive style.

Julian Knight MP
Chair, DCMS Committee