

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

UPDATE ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCOTLAND'S CULTURE AND TOURISM SECTORS

SUBMISSION FROM FESTIVALS EDINBURGH

EDINBURGH'S FESTIVALS AND COVID-19: KEY ISSUES AND PRIORITIES FOR 2021

1. Changing context

Festivals Edinburgh – the collective organisation representing the eleven major international Edinburgh Festivals – submitted written evidence to the Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Affairs Committee in June 2020 and gave oral evidence on 27 August about the impacts of Covid-19.

In the five months since then, our festivals have worked hard to remain agile and resilient by accelerating innovative ways to share work with the public and targeted community audiences; supporting creative work and development; and sustaining digital global connections. Meantime, many of the grave financial and operational challenges we identified have worsened as it becomes clear that restrictions will likely be required through 2021.

As Edinburgh and its festivals gradually return from their enforced absence, we will also emerge into a world shaken from its old habits. Creatives, residents and visitors will all display differing levels of caution, depending on such factors as age and health, in reconnecting with old behaviours they had taken for granted. Many will not want to return to how things were, particularly with regard to matters of environmental and social concern. They will be seeking reassurance that our festivals have grasped concerns that pre-dated the pandemic and have taken the opportunity of enforced closure to re-set the dial on the nature of live events in our festival city.

Our opportunity and ambition is that we will be positioned anew not only as a safe and well managed festival city, but also as a festival city whose innovative programming shows that we take our responsibilities seriously to our people, our place and our planet. To act as a compass towards this goal, we will shortly be sharing the ten-year Sustainable Festival City Vision we have agreed across festivals and key stakeholders, to form the basis of a series of discussions and consultations with wider networks about how we can best work together on successful adaptation and renewal.

While the rollout of vaccination programmes is hugely welcome, we know 2021 will not be back to business as usual, so we have identified a set of common priorities needing to be taken into planning scenarios by festivals and stakeholders for a 2021 season that will continue to work with huge uncertainties.

2. Safer Systems

The year ahead will be driven by the immediate need to comply with Government restrictions that will determine the manner in which live events can return. Despite positive progress on vaccines and testing, we cannot assume that normal behaviours and regulations will have returned in time for the 2021 Edinburgh Festivals season. We will need to work together as a sector to explore how events of all scales can be planned and staged. Some festivals are in a strong position to mitigate the unsafe gathering of people through their safe systems planning, while others may become focussed on the delivery of pop-up or promenade events that are designed to minimise the need for major crowd management controls. Indoor work will require the festivals to work in close partnership with venues across the city to ensure that proper procedure is being followed, with the current track and trace requirement needing to be securely embedded within purchase and ticketing processes.

All of these requirements will also have an impact on the circulation of audiences before and after events, meaning that organisers will need to include a time contingency and audiences will need to arrive earlier and depart later than expected. This may have a further impact on the wider hospitality and transportation sectors that city authorities will be keen to be able to model and influence more actively than ever. A shared priority for 2021 will be to work across festivals and partners on the development of a model of future operations for live events which balances public health and audience psychological needs with business financial viability.

Edinburgh's Festivals along with the events, culture and performance sectors in Scotland are committed to playing our full part in suppression of the virus. We are acutely conscious however of the importance of using this extended period out of operation for planning and preparation at national and local authority levels, to secure the return of Scotland's major creative assets when it is safe to do so. We engage continually with public health experts and national policymakers through the national Events Industry Advisory Group to input to planning. Two key considerations are:

- how the regulations in the national protection levels framework can be developed in line with latest evidence so that there can be as much forward visibility as possible about the conditions under which events will be able to resume at safely distanced levels; and

- understanding critical decision dates about the viability of the return of live festivals and events in 2021, which for Edinburgh's summer festivals will generally fall between March and May.

We recommend that the work of national and local authorities on planning for the conditions under which events can return must continue to receive urgent consideration, to provide the maximum lead-time for organisations to make decisions on viability of 2021 live operations.

3. Places and Spaces

At present it is unclear when or under what conditions the main cultural venues in the city can open again to the public. This fact, taken together with the reality of programming a 2021 festival in the knowledge that it could be cancelled at short notice, may draw some festivals to smaller events and outdoor public spaces – minimising financial risk and allowing experimentation with more city dispersal and open-air offers with low environmental impact. However, given that the situation is uncertain and there are early indications that it may improve as the year progresses, some festivals will continue to plan for large scale outdoor events that encompass innovative crowd management controls and rigorous safety systems.

In the short term, many places and spaces around the city, whether parks, community centres or schools, are not currently equipped to stage outdoor work, but what does already exist is a foundation of support through the wider range of community partnerships that the festivals have grown in recent years. A shared priority for 2021 will be to work across festivals on the re-imagining of how local venues and public spaces might better host live events for the benefit of artists, our host city, people and planet.

It must be recognised that while distancing of 2 metres remains the safe requirement, a large majority of cultural operators could not deliver a live experience without incurring major losses and risking insolvency. There has already been recognition in 2020 that our national theatre network would be lost without an emergency support package from Government, and that need will continue for as long as extensive restrictions remain. Now as we move into a second season at risk for Scotland's festivals and cultural events, 2021 will be the time of maximum danger so far for these non-building-based assets. For Edinburgh with its reputation as a global festival hub for performing arts, this extended period out of operation poses additional risks when other parts of the world will have the ability to plan and restart sooner with staging the kind of extraordinary work for which we are renowned. There is ground to make up urgently to reassert and renew Edinburgh's world-leading status as a festival city.

We recommend that a joint capital city and national effort is needed to identify how a return for Scotland's flagship festival city can be secured in 2021 to reconnect Scotland's creative sector with wider markets and restart livelihoods. This will require supportive investment in the physical and digital infrastructure and management systems needed to open up covid-safe live events.

4. Financial Risk Sharing

The loss of the 2020 festival season has had a major impact on the finances of the festivals and although public funders and some private supporters have generously allowed the repurposing of grants and donations, the financial picture will continue to be highly constrained during 2021. If anything, a number of factors point to further financial hardship including the reduction of box office income due to both reduced capacity and some audiences being less keen to return, and the contraction of sponsorship markets as companies refocus their income on their own recovery.

This reduction in income will be compounded by the likely increases in expenditure not only to comply with government guidelines for the return of live events but also to reassure and communicate with audiences and residents. A shared priority for 2021 will be to work across festivals with funders and stakeholders on measures to support key additional costs and financial risks during the pandemic to enable the festivals to return to viability and deliver long-term value as global cultural brands for Scotland.

Probably the most urgent of these challenges is the market failure for events insurance. All of our festivals report that their insurance brokers have stated they are not currently insurable for cancellation and non-appearance cover for reasons relating to a pandemic. This is a situation that will affect every live event in the country.

It is a reserved matter and representations have been made by industry and devolved government representatives for many months about the gravity of the problem and the need for UK Government underwriting of a live festivals and events scheme, as has already been put in place for film and TV production. Several reinsurance models have been proposed including a similar approach to Pool Re – Britain's state-backed terrorism reinsurer which was set up to enable insurance companies to offer cover after the wave of UK terror attacks in the 1990s.

Currently we are being told that the Treasury is looking for a case to be made that demonstrates insurance coverage is the only barrier to events taking place. It is not possible to construct such a case when we anticipate significant public health restrictions on gatherings for many months. However, given the lead times involved

in infrastructure and supply chain planning for major events, if the green light on support for a reinsurance proposal were to wait for this, the whole summer season could be at risk. This has been recognised in Germany, where the Federal Government has already announced a €2.5Bn [cancellation fund](#) for events taking place in the second half of 2021.

We recommend that the Scottish Parliament moves to support the Scottish Government's representations on developing a UK Government-backed reinsurance scheme for live festivals and events. While this will help create conditions for festival and events operators to trade out of the crisis, the market will still be fragile in terms of ticket, sponsorship and philanthropic income – so we further recommend the need for targeted sector support in 2021-22. For example, underwriting ticket income to provide a safety net for pivotal festivals and events below which finances would collapse; and incentives to retain and grow philanthropic donations to maximise available funding for the creative workforce.

5. Digital Acceleration

2020 saw festivals rapidly develop digital offers to compensate for the cancellation of real world events. Such operations opened many festivals' eyes to the great demands of digital production, as well as the challenges of choosing a suitable distribution platform. Most festivals adopted a donation model after recognising that they were not in a position at that point to develop alternatives such as freemium or subscription models. The 2020 digital offers succeeded in increasing international reach, as well as creating a greater sense of accessibility, while also creating their own challenges around digital fatigue and digital exclusion.

Most of our festivals feel that digital will remain a major focus of their 2021 programme, both for the new reach offered by these hybrid modes, and given the likelihood that the ongoing pandemic will curtail planning windows and require mitigation of the potential risk of a snap local lockdown. However there is a recognition across the festivals and the wider culture sector both that they lack the in-depth digital skills and knowledge to fully develop this opportunity, and also that there is great value in supporting artists and creatives to develop more digital literacy to safeguard their livelihoods. A shared priority for 2021 will be to work across festivals on identifying the digital requirements of the future hybrid model within the areas of digital production, distribution and promotion.

We recommend that national economic recovery programmes and city development programmes sustain the momentum and potential of digital innovation that has accelerated due to the pandemic, through supporting digital infrastructure and skills development for the creative sector.

6. Creative Development

Festivals during 2021 are seen by most of our curatorial teams as mini-experiments in programming and presentation given the ongoing restrictions that will curtail many of the normal programme activities, especially those that take place in and around the education sector. In this restricted scenario we may be able to increase the focus on providing a shared space for professional dialogue, not only between festivals themselves but also between festivals, other creative organisations, and independent practitioners active in areas of shared interest. As the recovery from the pandemic seeks to address future direction, this space can help to explore and develop action in key topics including social inclusion and cultural diversity.

For a number of festivals the creative development of practitioners is paramount, and during 2021 this will be mostly undertaken through a mix of online workshops and training, plus the creation of digital marketplaces through which practitioners will be able to connect themselves to the wider cultural market. A shared priority for 2021 will be to work across festivals to share programming ambitions and make connections to wider networks of creative organisations and practitioners, in order to enrich the quality, range and diversity of festivals' offers and the creative careers they support.

We support the recommendation from Culture Counts to Scottish Government to prioritise putting Creative Scotland funding on a three-year basis as soon as possible, to maximise stability and resilience for the sector emerging from this crisis, both at individual and organisational level. We also recommend that as the national strategy for culture is taken forward, it explicitly recognises the importance of and need to nurture the industry dimension of the capital city's festivals, for the unmatched power of UK and international industry connections they bring directly to Scotland's door.

7. Environmental commitments

For many in society the pandemic has become the sole focus of discussion, at the expense of the climate crisis which until recently was seen as the greatest challenge of our age. However, the Festivals remain resolutely focused on working together to reduce our environmental impacts. All the Festivals are committed to a joint environmental policy, updated and strengthened in 2019, to embed sustainability in core business operations and reduce carbon emissions. The Festivals also

contribute to the wider climate conversation through programming that encourages audiences to consider and debate major issues including climate change.

There will be considerable economic pressures to rebuild businesses and return to traditional economic growth, but it will not be in society's best interests if we lose this opportunity to put sustainability at the heart of rebuilding our festivals. A shared priority for 2021 will be the development of the festivals' Carbon Reduction Route Map, as a framework for individual carbon reduction planning, which will enable us to demonstrate how we are actively embedding carbon reduction to contribute to Edinburgh's world-leading goal of reducing carbon emissions to net zero by 2030.

A Green recovery will require system level change as well as individual organisational commitment, and we recommend that the development of Green recovery funds include prioritisation of infrastructure that will future-proof our cities' public spaces and buildings including more hardwired clean power, electric transport infrastructure, and building retrofitting support.

8. Global Reconnection

The general consensus is that our 2021 festival offerings in the real world will be highly focused on participants and audiences based locally - with the international engagement found mostly in digital programmes, except for examples where individual international creatives may be invited to play key roles in productions. However, connecting with and exploring our place in the world are important to the long-term value the festivals bring to Scotland, and steps will need to be taken to ensure that the international profile of Edinburgh and Scotland as hosts to the world-leading festivals is maintained in the cultural sector and amongst cultural audiences.

This global reconnection following the hiatus of 2020 is seen as being undertaken through three channels: through festival programme partnerships themselves, through industry networks and bodies, and through general media communications. This will be more difficult given that the cultural offer may be mostly in the digital sphere, but it is seen as crucial to the long-term recovery and sustainability of the festivals. A shared priority for 2021 will be to work across festivals to identify how, in a closed pandemic world and post-Brexit Britain, we can safeguard current and future interaction between Scotland's creatives and the wider world.

We recommend that it is made a shared priority for recovery across city and national agencies to secure resource for sustaining Scotland's international profile as a creative and outward-looking nation. Given the new difficulties of securing mobility for temporary creative workers between the UK and EU post-Brexit, we also recommend urgent support for the case to exempt such workers from visa restrictions, and we support the Culture Counts call to establish an Office for Cultural Exchange to safeguard and support international touring, festivals and residencies.

***Festivals Edinburgh
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