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**STEPS TO GETTING THE OUTDOOR EVENT SECTOR RESTARTED**

**Submission to the Business in COVID All Party Parliamentary Group – February 2021**

**Background**

The outdoor event industry covers a hugely diverse range of events, from small local carnivals and community functions to steam engine rallies through to large scale festivals and agricultural shows. Together these are estimated to provide employment for over 500,000 people and to generate over £30 billion in Gross Added Value for the UK economy (Bournemouth University, 2019).

Last summer (2020) the Events Industry Forum worked closely with DCMS and PHE to produce guidance that allowed some small outdoor events to take place but these were extremely limited by social distancing and the economics of having to restrict numbers. At most, these events barely broke even and a number lost money.

Four key factors prevented most outdoor events from taking place last summer:

* The lack of planning time once the go ahead was given in June – most large events take at least 6 months to organise
* The economics of organising events with social distancing – even at 1 metre
* The crowd management dynamics of certain types of event
* The lack of support and uncertainties created by some local authorities

This last point is crucial. While some forward thinking local authorities did their best to support events taking place, many took a risk averse approach and banned them, often at the last minute. A classic example was the Southampton Boat Show which was told at 6.30pm on the eve of the event they could not go ahead. Another example was Wiltshire County Council which banned all events in the county.

In many cases these decisions are based on nothing more than opinions and rather than evidence.

One of the difficulties with local authorities has been the attitude of some Directors of Public Health that any gatherings are a risk, despite PHE having been consulted on and approved the EIF guidance. Although we have raised this repeatedly with Government as a key problem, Ministers say they cannot dictate to local authorities and, although PHE officials have said they will brief Directors of Public Health to support events where they can, they have so far not done this and have refused to issue any formal statement supporting outdoor events taking place despite saying repeatedly that there is no evidence of them spreading the virus.

Another factor that has hampered events taking place has been some confusion within local authorities about capacities in different guidances. To try to overcome this the Government set out guide capacities for outdoor events in its most recent Tier guidance. However, while this addresses one issue, our view is that it is much more realistic and safer for capacities to be set by risk assessment due to the varied nature of outdoor events.

**Going Forward**

The outdoor event industry is ready to restart as soon as it is given the go-ahead. The guidance is in place and currently being updated for outdoor events to take place within COVID-safe rules. This guidance is based on a risk assessment approach rather than capacities.

The ability of outdoor events to restart will depend, however, on some key factors:

Planning Time: If the industry was given the go-ahead to restart in April, some small events would probably be able to take place in the early summer but, due to the planning time needed, the earliest most events of any scale could happen would be late summer and into the Autumn. Some events cannot move to the Autumn and many, like the larger festivals, will continue to struggle until social distancing is lifted.

Insurance: With so much uncertainty around local authorities, the variations in the virus and so forth, organising events has become a high risk gamble. Hundreds of thousands of pounds were lost by the Southampton Boat Show being stopped at the last minute. Commercial insurers will not cover this and the vast majority of event organisers cannot afford to take these exceptional risks, particularly as many have seen no income since the season of 2019. To give organisers the confidence they need to make the investment we need Government to underwrite at least part of this risk. Proposals have already been submitted to DCMS and the Treasury on this.

Local Authority/Public Health Support: As local authorities and the Directors of Public Health they employ are so key to whether an event is allowed to take place organisers need to have confidence that they will not pull the rug from underneath them at the last minute. We need local authorities to take a pro-active approach to events rather than being totally risk averse. Directors of Public Health need much clearer guidance from PHE about supporting events and we would like to see local authorities working through their Safety Advisory Groups to help event organisers to create safe events. Events make a substantial economic contribution to local economies through the supply networks they support and the revenue they help to generate in the hospitality sector in particular.

Social Distancing: Until social distancing is lifted the necessary restrictions on numbers will make it very difficult for some types of event to take place economically, such as larger music festivals. However, this depends very much on the event and the measures that can practicably be taken to manage this factor, hence we strongly suggest that allowing events to go ahead should be based on risk assessment rather than limiting capacity numbers.

Supply Chain support: There are increasing concerns that many specialist businesses that supply the outdoor sector have had little financial support since the pandemic started and are going out of business rapidly. Many freelances and sole traders have also found other work and may not return to the sector. This could lead to serious shortages of equipment and expertise as the industry starts to recover. We would urge the Government to recognise that these businesses are as crucial to the future of the economy as the events they support, yet most have had no recognition in grants or similar support.

Cash Flow: Many events have used up their cash flow surviving the lockdown and there is likely to be a serious issue with this as we come out of lockdown. Suppliers, also strapped for cash, are going to want to be paid quickly yet ticket agencies do not generally release the funds to organisers until after the event. Similarly, those who normally pay for sites to trade from are likely to be reluctant to part with their funds until they are certain events can go ahead. On top of this April will see rates bills and COVID loan repayments starting to hit home unless the Government extends the reliefs.

Autumn Crowding: To add to all the above, as each month passes more and more events are moving into quarters 3 and 4, which is not only causing crowding in terms of venue availability but is also going to put further strain on the supply chains who are themselves diminished. If we lose further suppliers in the next couple of months this will be further compounded.

We would like to thank you for your interest in the events industry which has been on its knees since the lockdown started and would welcome any support you can give it.

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Secretary

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