



SCIENTIFIC UPDATE FROM TOM RODDEN

The following is a summary of the briefing from Tom Rodden, Chief Scientific Adviser to the Department of Digital, Media, Culture & Sport (DCMS), for Events Industry Forum Members on Wednesday, 24th February, 2021. This was a continuation of a previous meeting that took place on 10th February – see separate notes.

Background to Road Map

At the start of the meeting, Tom Rodden outlined the four stages to reopening the economy, set out by the Prime Minister on the previous Monday, emphasising that the dates given for these stages in the roadmap are indicative, and the Government will be led by data, rather than fixed dates. Before taking each step, the Government will review the latest data and will only ease restrictions further if it is safe to do so. The indicative, 'no earlier than' dates in the roadmap are all contingent on the data and subject to change. . Asked if the optimism generated by the announcement might be over optimistic, he said that the dates should at this stage be treated with some caution. There are many factors that need to be taken into account including peoples' behaviour as the lockdown eased and the results from Events Research Programme pilots taking place this year. Nevertheless, the roadmap offered a clear path forward and the aim was to unlock things steadily and avoid the stop/start situation that had occurred previously.

Events Research Programme - Pilot Events

Work is currently being undertaken to agree a framework for pilot events, which will inform the selection of pilot events that will take place from April. The intention is for a range of pilot events to be held to test different settings at venues and events. Pilot events have yet to be selected and DCMS would welcome suggestions for pilot events from the different sectors of the industry. The intention is that the pilots should be completed and results should be ready, together with resulting guidance, by June. Paul Hooper offered to arrange for an agricultural show to be a pilot.

Ventilation

Asked about the effectiveness of ventilation systems, Tom said that this was thought to reduce the risk but there has been little detailed research around this or around how much virus you need to become ill. This is likely to be looked at in more detail as part of the pilots. Martin Burton said that Circuses had quite a bit of data on how CO2 levels were affected by ventilation and agreed to share this with DCMS. As part of the pilots, the intention is also to look at the effectiveness of some of the technology solutions, such as UVC. Tom said that he would circulate a paper on ventilation.

Key Areas of Risk

There was some discussion around the areas of risk at events and Tom Rodden told the meeting that any areas where there was close proximity between people would be considered high risk, such as queuing, entry and exit points, stalls, hospitality and other points where people can congregate. Enclosed buildings/structures are also considered higher risk because of the limited air movement.

Capacities

Capacity limits have been included in the roadmap for large outdoor events. These will be reviewed as part of the Events Research Programme pilots, which should inform the effectiveness of setting capacity limits.

Testing

Although concerns have been raised in the industry about the feasibility of on-site testing and urging for a 'passport' system, there are wider issues around such schemes such as practical application and ethics. The group discussed looking at other ways of how testing could be implemented including linking tests to tickets.

Local Authority Guidance/Directors of Public Health

Asked if Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) could be given clear scientific guidance on how to assess the risks at events, Tom said that DCMS are aware of the need for guidance and that Public Health England (PHE) are in the process of agreeing a set of principles with ADPH to create a consistency of understanding around this area. They are very aware of the need for urgency in this respect with many events now in the planning stages and needing to liaise with local authorities.

Longer Term

Current thinking is that COVID will become endemic in the population. As a result of this, public health is likely to remain a factor that event organisers need to plan for as an on-going issue. Tom quoted the example of Germany where people stay at home if they become ill rather than soldiering on highlighting that a change in public attitudes, approach and behaviours towards public health will likely happen in the future. Going forward, it is important we plan and are prepared for a future pandemic.

Animals

Asked about issues around livestock regulations at agricultural shows, Tom said that discussions were happening with DEFRA around this area and the risks of the virus jumping across species.

Present at the meeting were:

Tom Rodden, DCMS Chief Scientific Adviser
Pak Ling Wan, DCMS Tourism Team
Steve Heap, Association of Festival Organisers – EIF Chair
Jim Winship, The Event Services Association – EIF Secretary
Paul Hooper, Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations
Tom Clements, National Outdoor Events Association
Mark Laurie, National Caterers' Association
Andy Lenthall, Production Services Association
Des Fitzgerald, The Showmen's Guild
Martin Burton, Association of Circus Proprietors of GB