

## THE CONVERSATION

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## Lockdown delay: how music venues will be impacted by uncertainty over relaxing restrictions

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The closed O2 Institute in Digbeth, Birmingham, which was due to re-open on 25 June, 2021. Nick Maslen/Alamy

As many as 12.6 million gig-goers attended live music events in 2019, generating £4.7 billion, according to industry body [UK Music](#). With the arrival of the pandemic in March 2020, all of that was put on ice. There were no live events, venues had been shuttered, and for all those linked to the events supply chain livelihoods were under serious threat (around [45,633](#) full time equivalent jobs in the music tourism sector alone).

Following Boris Johnson's [announcement on Monday](#), some of those debilitating COVID-19 restrictions are set to remain for a little while longer. However the continued relaxation of restrictions proceeds (or doesn't) in the UK, the effects of the pandemic on nightlife and the creative sector are already profound. Our work on the [Birmingham Live Music Project](#), collaborative research between

Aston University, Birmingham City University, and Newcastle University, shows the extent of these longer-term restrictions on local live music scenes.



Many had been itching for a return to a much less restricted live music scene prior to the government's announcement. Ben Fisher/Alamy

Prior to lockdown in Birmingham, approximately 98,000 people could have enjoyed a live music event across 195 venues, ranging from a small gig at a 150-capacity space, all the way to a 15,600 show at one of the largest venues in England. While large and medium live music venues constitute 4% of the city venue map, smaller spaces predominate – making them a crucial feature of the live music ecosystem.

Though initiatives like the UK Government's £1.57 billion culture recovery fund and Scotland's £2.2 million grassroots music venues stabilisation fund were intended to mitigate the effects of the shutdown, it hasn't been enough.

The government's five-stage roadmap to re-opening theatres and live music venues, wasn't terribly popular either when it was announced in June last year. Arts organisations were critical of the fact that proposals curtailed their capacity to plan and were ambiguous about support despite constrained commercial activity.

Stages 4 and 5 of the roadmap - which we're currently in - reduced Birmingham venues to 20%-25% of normal capacity. This led to a 75% drop in income across venues that reopened, with a large number staying closed until May 2021. Recent events in the city have seen gigs take place with reduced audiences, with patrons required to adhere to COVID precautions like remaining seated, table service and wearing masks when moving through venues. The situation in Birmingham is echoed elsewhere across the country, with venues at risk of closure from Bournemouth to Inverness.

While venues try to maintain pre-pandemic ticket prices and the availability of shows by offering multiple gigs on the same day, their economic viability is massively diminished by the drop in capacity. Despite positive initiatives, including road closures to support businesses to deliver outdoor events and the culture recovery fund rescue package, the current situation isn't sustainable without further support.

### **Protecting the sector**

A delay in reopening isn't just a matter of venues simply opening a couple of weeks later - there are knock-on effects with serious consequences for the live music venues and their supply chains.

The situation also varies depending on location. There's no direct precedent for routes in and out of lockdown and individual countries' decisions are shaped by their own experiences of the pandemic. Support over the year has ranged from compensation packages for companies without revenue in Denmark, to a cancellation insurance scheme in Germany.

Industry associations, from UK Music to the Association of Independent Festivals – as well as the cross-party Digital, Culture, Media And Sport Select Committee – have repeatedly called for a similar government-backed insurance scheme [in the UK](#) to no avail.

In the UK, these last minute changes and gaps in communication from the government have become a major problem. Venues have been planning gigs and implementing safety measures for months. Their financial margins are tight at the best of times and not knowing whether they can operate at capacity, or at all, in the coming weeks could affect rent, or lead to [permanent closures](#).

The Music Venue Trust estimates that the delay could cost the sector an [additional £36 million](#) on top of the significant debt already accrued. Doubt about when revenues will start to flow again is causing a crisis of confidence not just for venues but for their landlords, creditors and suppliers.

Venues need to know that the the gap in funding from these continued disruptions will be met. Though the government has said the additional £300 million as part of the third round of its culture recovery fund will be allocated “[shortly](#)”, industry insiders point out that it has yet to be released to the venues that desperately need it. Other proposed measures include the extension of a moratorium on commercial evictions and prolonged relief on business rates.

The underlying challenge, as noted for some time now, has been to unwind the government financial safety net without [pulling the rug out](#) from underneath the sector. Moving the date when venues can operate as planned without clarifying their funding situation risks doing just that. While public health is obviously paramount, the past year has shown that it’s possible to consider the relationship between short-term safety and longer-term sustainability. Clarity about support will be vital in this final stretch.

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