

The impact of Covid-19 has been swift and brutal on our industry. Jobs have been lost, businesses shut down, and a way of life frozen until further notice. This is in marked contrast to many other industries that have continued on without too much disruption. To complicate this further, our venues are now under threat, as business owners and landlords consider more financially viable uses for these spaces, that may lead to changes of use and redevelopment.

In the absence of a clear roadmap, the government is causing uncertainty for all types of venues and events, and the associated workforce. Next month, trial events take place in Liverpool (with a full return for all venues and nightclubs in the UK scheduled by June), and this follows a host of similar trial events around Europe and beyond. In Barcelona a 5,000 capacity rock concert with no social distancing has just taken place, and that followed a successful 500 capacity club event in the city last December. We have been advocating since last summer that Ireland plans trial events, starts small, learns from the experience, and builds up to being ready for a workable reopening. A specific plan including pre-event testing and the use of vaccine passports now needs to be laid out.

We acknowledge that a full reopening cannot happen until a significant amount of the population is vaccinated, but we find it hard to understand why no specific targets, dates or guidelines have been published by the Government to indicate to the whole industry what reopening may look like. Instead we have a roadmap from last September, that even at Level 1 would not be sufficient to allow most entertainment spaces to reopen and stay in business. Given the amount of international best practice information that is at our fingertips, and the knowledge that exists within our domestic entertainment industry, it is frustrating that Ireland is lagging so far behind in terms of an actual plan.

While some of the recently announced supports will benefit the entertainment and cultural sectors, it won't likely be enough to cover everyone. The Live Performance Support Scheme looks like it could be oversubscribed with applications, with many deserving venues and promoters that may miss out. Given the financial burden that is being

imposed on the national exchequer due to supports like this, it is now vital that Ireland develops a safe but realistic reopening plan that will remove the need of much of the financial support required by the industry.

It is now imperative that we see investment come back into the industry and that existing operators don't leave entirely. Community spirit has been crushed in the night-time industry in recent years, and needless to say, crippling insurance costs have been a big factor in this. Insurance for music venues and nightclubs is prohibitively expensive, far more than other industries, and some owners have described the role of running venues as feeling like they are "working for the insurance companies".

While we value the role of festivals and large scale events, we also measure the health of our entertainment and nightlife sector by the regular weekly offering in our cities and towns, and in particular our venues and cultural spaces. These are the incubation spaces for communities to grow, independent spirit to thrive, and crucially where performers and workers of all types can learn their trade, as well as earn a living. These venues have been mandated shut for over a year now, and will struggle to get back on their feet or to return at all. All of them will need specific improvements to meet the new safety demands of Covid-19 and will quite likely have to prepare for a period of restricted numbers and small profits, if any at all. Rent arrears is a big issue for many businesses, and without sufficient reopening grants that take this into account, we may not see venues last long enough to give a return on the state's support.

We need the Government and local authorities to recognise that without places to socialise and dance, we are removing opportunities for people to connect and further creating division in society. We also need to get serious. As our population increases and the country becomes more built up, it is becoming more and more difficult to run events and entertainment venues for fear of local resident objections. A fresh approach to noise management, soundproofing and mediation needs to be developed as soon as possible.

We also need to acknowledge the impact this has had on people's social lives and mental health, and create daytime and night-time activities they

can partake in. The finger pointing needs to stop. People need to live, businesses need to reopen, and there needs to be a more strategic approach to reopening this time, unlike last year. Large gatherings of people in a city or town centre will require a different level of planning, akin to large-scale event management, that could involve event industry professionals working alongside local authorities and the Gardaí.

In addition to this, stakeholder forums should be set-up within every local authority, and to be as inclusive towards all parts of the entertainment, cultural and hospitality sectors. We also think that there should be plans for staggered closing times to alleviate on-street crowding. It is also a good opportunity for on-trade businesses to continue to sell food and non-alcoholic offerings if such demand is there. There has been a general feeling since the shutdown of the industry, that now is the best time to introduce a new way of experiencing our cities and towns, that is less restrictive and more diverse.

Given the recent announcement regarding licensing law reform which will include extensions to trading hours, we believe that extensions should be introduced in the short-term in advance of the long-term legislative changes that will still take some time to be enacted. We also believe that special exemption order costs should be reduced by 75% with immediate effect and to be payable online rather than in court. This would be with the view of abolishing this archaic system in the long term, and rolling out an online system for all licences and permits in the coming months.

Finally, we should pay tribute to the young population of this country who have been amongst the most well-behaved out of any country throughout this pandemic. We believe that local authorities should work with young cultural communities to help design and reimagine outdoor public spaces as we enter the summer months.

Thanks to all the committee members for listening. Myself and Robbie will be happy to take any questions.