



# Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

## Oral evidence: Re-opening venues at capacity, HC 748

Tuesday 8 September 2020

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Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Steve Brine; Philip Davies; Alex Davies-Jones; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Damian Green; Damian Hinds; John Nicolson; Giles Watling.

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### Witnesses

I: Lord Andrew Lloyd-Webber, Composer and Owner, LW Theatres, Rebecca Kane Burton, Chief Executive, LW Theatres, Melvin Benn, Managing Director, Festival Republic, Lucy Noble, Artistic and Commercial Director, Royal Albert Hall and Chair, National Arenas Association, and Avi Lasarow, Chief Executive, Europe, Middle East and Africa, Prenetics.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Lloyd-Webber, Rebecca Kane Burton, Melvin Benn, Lucy Noble and Avi Lasarow.

Q1 **Chair:** This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and this is a further hearing into the impact of Covid-19 on the DCMS sectors, where we will be looking at the reopening at capacity of live music, theatre, sporting and other venues.

Today we are going to be joined by four separate panels of witnesses. In the first panel we have Lord Lloyd-Webber, composer and owner of LW Theatres, and Rebecca Kane Burton, CEO of LW Theatres; our second witness will be Melvin Benn, Managing Director of Festival Republic; our third will be Lucy Noble, Artistic and Commercial Director, Royal Albert Hall, and Chair, National Arenas Association; our fourth will be Avi Lasarow, CEO, Europe, Middle East and Africa, Prenetics, a company that specialises in testing.

Before we start our session I am going to ask any members to declare interests. I believe that Giles Watling will have an interest to declare. Can you unmute yourself, Giles, please?

**Giles Watling:** I beg your pardon, Chair. Only that I spent my entire life in theatre and therefore have a vested interest in it, and I am Chair of the APPG for Theatre.

**Chair:** Thank you. Does anyone else want to declare an interest? Kevin Brennan.

**Kevin Brennan:** I am a member of the Musicians' Union.

**Alex Davies-Jones:** Chair, I am also a member of the Musicians' Union.

**Chair:** Thank you, I think that concludes that. Our first witnesses are Lord Lloyd-Webber and Rebecca Kane Burton. Could you unmute yourselves, please? Thank you. It is the new Zoom; you all have to unmute yourselves. Good morning.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Can you hear us?

Q2 **Chair:** Yes, we can, loud and clear. Thank you for joining us this morning, much appreciated. The first question is if we have Covid with us for the long term, how will you operate? How do you stage productions that have a chance of being in any way profitable?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** That is asking almost the impossible, because I think it would be impossible. We know that theatre cannot operate with social distancing. If I can wind the clock back, as it were, back in early February was when I first heard that we could be looking at a situation where theatres had to close. As I had the production of a show I wrote, "Phantom of the Opera"—I am not the producer of it—in South Korea, we immediately looked at all of the measures that were being taken in South Korea to keep "Phantom of the Opera" open there to full houses, which



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apart from two weeks where it had to close for various reasons, it has been able to do and it has now ended its run there.

We immediately commissioned with Rebecca a full review here of all of the measures that were taken and therefore we were completely ahead of the curve. We were convinced that if we took one of our theatres—and we chose the London Palladium because in many ways it is the most difficult—we could demonstrate that it was possible for theatres to reopen at full capacity safely. To that end, we took the Secretary of State around the Palladium earlier in the year with officers of Public Health England, where I believe we did demonstrate this, which led to a pilot that we had hoped would be about demonstrating that the theatre could open at capacity. In fact, it turned into a socially distanced pilot that rather proved that it was almost impossible on a number of levels for theatre to work in that way.

I can ask Rebecca because she is probably more able to detail these measures than I am, but I am absolutely confident that the air, for example, in the London Palladium—and indeed in all my theatres—is purer than the air outside. I think the air handling is critical in all of this. It seems to me that the important thing that needs to be done now is to send some of the money that is being spent on the arts to theatres that may not have been able to afford to do what we have been able to do, so that theatres can reopen safely.

The answer to your question though is that it would be impossible. The margins for a big musical are very, very tight. Say you were talking a really big musical like the Disney “Frozen” that is hopefully coming into Drury Lane next year and say they were operating at £500,000 a week. The biggest slice of that of course goes in VAT and I would reckon that Disney would be very lucky to make their investment back on that show for perhaps two or three years.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** At least.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** At least, and that is at full capacity. The margins are incredibly tight.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** To add to that, in terms of where we sit with Covid, if your question is about when we are living with Covid for the long term, the challenge is looking on behalf of the workforce. This has been absolutely devastating and catastrophic for the theatre industry and for the live sector. Over 300,000 people are employed by theatre alone. You can more than double that when you look at what is going on for the live sector and that does not even count all the ancillary services that support what we do. That is over 1 million people employed by this sector. That is huge.

That of course makes us uniquely vulnerable as a country in dealing with a pandemic because the arts—performing arts, live theatre—are one of our biggest assets and one of the strongest exports and things that bring



in tourism. Over 34 million people come to this country every year, largely driven by the opportunity to see theatre. If we do not do something to address that and we do not find a means of being able to open theatres and venues again then 1 million people will still be without work. It has been a very long time and many of them have had no support. It is a really bad, catastrophic time and we need to find a way out of it.

**Q3 Chair:** I spoke to the Chancellor just the other day in terms of trying to extend furlough for those particular sectors. To wind back in terms of what you said, Lord Lloyd-Webber, your pilot scheme that you wanted to undertake in a non-socially distanced theatre, what was the reason given for not going ahead with that? Why did the pilot change from what you originally planned to what occurred?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Rebecca, you dealt with this directly.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Sure. We were very keen, as Lord Lloyd-Webber said, and right from the beginning of lockdown we were challenging ourselves to find solutions, to look for mitigations. We looked around the world; we looked, as Lord Lloyd-Webber said, at "Phantom of the Opera" in Seoul. That is a country that never went into a countrywide lockdown. It has very effective technology, test and trace, and a very personal sense of how to maintain hygiene and take personal responsibility and therefore it has been able to go out and about and enjoy facets of our industry without being in a lockdown. We started scouring the planet to look for mitigations and solutions and that is what we demonstrated, I think, at the pilot at the London Palladium, that you can open a venue successfully and professionally.

In terms of what it was able to demonstrate, it was very disheartening that the pilot was not therefore seen as a way to get to full reopening. At the time DCMS and Government were looking very closely at stage 4 and some theatres have been able to open, but it is a very small smattering of a handful of theatres that have been able to open under stage 4. What we would have liked to have seen was that the pilot at the Palladium demonstrated the professionalism, the diligence, the strength of the mitigations that we had in place there to get theatres reopened and on that basis give us a conditional reopening date.

**Q4 Chair:** What was the reason given for changing the pilot?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** There were lots of concerns about what was happening at the time. There was a nervousness. We were originally told in the summer that the Government were aiming at a conditional reopening date of October. We were thrilled to hear that in June and July. I think there was a nervousness about pubs opening and wanting to see what the impact of that was. We totally understand and respect there is a nervousness around looking at what happens when schools open. Schools have only just started reopening in the last couple of weeks, but I very much like to think that if that is successful—and we all know how



important that is for the population as a whole—that then gives an added incentive to Government to give us a conditional reopening date.

We need the time to plan. We cannot switch on theatre like a tap. You need three, four, five months' planning minimum to even get shows staged. My nervousness, and I know Lord Lloyd-Webber shares this, is that Christmas is very much hanging in the balance as we speak and there is not very much in the way of content that can be put back on this Christmas even if we were to get the green light tomorrow. We need that conditional reopening date as soon as possible to let us plan and reopen and get this part of the economy back up and running.

**Q5 Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you, Lord Lloyd-Webber and Rebecca, for speaking to us this morning. You have mentioned the pilot at the Palladium. Can you explain some of the logistics that were involved in that—so, the costs that you incurred, and the extra staff that you needed to put on in order for it to be viable?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** In terms of cost, I think we spent over £100,000 putting that pilot on. We had some incredibly generous offers. Beverley Knight, who is a very good friend of ours, performed for free, which was amazing of her, but we would have lost an awful lot more money if people like her had not shown their generosity. The challenge with it was we learnt loads. I have an incredibly professional and diligent team who are experts in the field and that is what we were able to demonstrate in how we ran the pilot. The challenge and the reality of it and what it demonstrated to Government and particularly to ourselves is, as Lord Lloyd-Webber said, social distancing in theatre does not work. Having 30% capacity in an auditorium like the Palladium or anywhere around the country does not work from a sheer economic point of view.

One of the challenges that we had was the guidance that has been coming from Government is incredibly detailed and incredibly prescriptive. While we understand where some of that is coming from, that does mean it is incredibly labour-intensive to get yourself into a position to host an event. From a pure staffing point of view, if we are opening the Palladium for a gig, ordinarily our staffing ratio would be 1:40. In this case in the pilot it was 1:10, so one staff member for every 10 members of the public. You do not have to be a great mathematician to work out what that does to a very tight margin. Gigs alone, in the gig economy, you are probably looking at a 90% occupancy needed just to break even. As Lord Lloyd-Webber said, that is before you even start looking at paying back investment and particularly the long-term investment that musicals need.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** One of the things that is very important with my theatres is that I believe very passionately that I have been lucky in my career and that the theatres are a way of putting something back into the profession that I love. Every penny that we make in the theatres goes back into the buildings. At the moment we are in the throes of completing the big restoration of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. There comes a point



now where we cannot go on much more. We are bumping up against our bank covenants and all of these things because, as I say, theatre is an incredibly labour-intensive business. In many ways, putting on a show now is almost a labour of love. Very few shows hit the jackpot that a "Hamilton" or a "Lion King" or a "Phantom of the Opera" do.

It is absolutely imperative that people understand that you just cannot throw a theatre show up. It is not like a cinema. You cannot just open the building. The people who really need help at the moment, I believe, are also the producers, because without the producers we have no content. At the moment, as Rebecca said, this Operation Sleeping Beauty—I had to suggest that it was not going to be called Operation Cinderella, because my new show is "Cinderella" and not a pantomime, I have to say—it would be possible to perhaps get that going if a green light were given now in a kind of scaled-down way, because the producer of that has many other pantomimes going around Britain anyway at Christmastime, so it is a little different.

The pantomimes are a little different, but something like "Phantom of the Opera", if we got the green light now, I would think it just about might get on stage in February and March of next year, not before, and a new musical May, April/May. I have to take the decision about whether we go into rehearsal with my "Cinderella" or not. If I do not go into rehearsal there is also the chance that it might open somewhere where people are being a little more helpful.

**Q6 Alex Davies-Jones:** You mentioned you spent nearly £100,000 in getting the pilot up and running. How much did the Government contribute to that?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** There was not a financial contribution from the Government. To be honest, I do not think we would have sought or be expecting that.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** We would not want that.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** We are very happy to support. Lord Lloyd-Webber has been very clear that what we have been doing at the Palladium was about helping theatres up and down the country and we are very happy to lead—

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Everywhere, all over the world. It is not something that is just for my theatres. It is an incredibly important point. My belief is that we have to get theatres open. Any information that we have, anything that we have, we are very happy to share with everybody.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Yes, absolutely.

**Q7 Alex Davies-Jones:** You mentioned social distancing measures, and you have put in place quite a number of safety measures in your theatres. I have quite a few small theatres in my own constituency, some independent ones and local authority-run theatres. How viable would you



say those measures are for implementing in those smaller theatres and the independently run theatres?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Absolutely they are, and we always did that with those in mind. The whole point about what we did at the Palladium was we knew venues up and down the country were being inundated with kit and technology and, "This will solve this and this will do this for you". One of the things that Lord Lloyd-Webber made clear to me that I could do with my team is use the resources and the professionalism of our team to sift through all of those opportunities, work out which are the optimums and what works. Without denigrating what happened at the Palladium pilot, some of them are things that you are very comfortable with seeing in supermarkets and pubs and other places that have now reopened, whether that is from increased cleaning regimes through to hand sanitisers through to one-way systems, all those sorts of mitigations. Of course, face masks are a very obvious one that people are now used to. A lot of those things can be used very easily by venues of every single size and scale, and Lord Lloyd-Webber was always very keen that the solutions we found could be used across the widest church of venues, because we did not want people to be prohibited by cost, resource or by anything else extraneous that would slow down a reopening of our sector.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Would it be helpful to run through what the measures are that we had at the Palladium?

Q8 **Alex Davies-Jones:** If you could outline the cost, because I am very keen to find out how much these cost, especially for independent theatres and the smaller venues.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Sure. There are things that we have done additionally, for example, fogging. Fogging is something that is incredibly effective. You need to do it every 28 days, but from what we have looked at, the most efficient fogging you can undertake is £7,000 a month. That would probably be a cost that is too high for some venues. However, our belief—and what we would like to develop with Government—is that there should be a baseline of four, five or six measures that every single venue across the UK can undertake. That in effect becomes what I call the kite mark, so in the same way that shops have a poster that they can display that says, "We are Covid secure; we have undertaken these measures" that is a kite mark we started discussing with DCMS yesterday.

If that could be developed and give the audience confidence that those baseline measures have all been taken, if other venues like the Palladium—because we have the resources—wish to then undertake fogging, then that is an additional step that we may choose to take. I think what would be helpful from Government is complete clarity on what the baseline measures are. It would not only give them confidence that we should reopen, and I believe we have that, but also we can explain that to the customer. There is a big job to be done to reassure audiences that they can come back; 80% of people that came to the London



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Palladium pilot said that they are absolutely desperate and very keen to come back to theatre. We saw how quickly those tickets were taken up. Just this morning a new show in one of our theatres that will not open until May or June, hopefully, of next year has gone on sale, "Back to the Future". It is also going great guns. There is a huge public appetite out there for theatre and we just need an opening date.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Coming back to the question about the cost for smaller venues, because this is an important question, that is where I believe some of this money that has been put aside for the arts should be going, because it is surely not about trying to prop up buildings through this time. Coming back to the first question today, surely it would be better to spend the money on making it possible for venues that may not be able to afford some of the things that we have done to be able to open too. I would have thought that was a much better use of the money, rather than putting it down a bottomless pit, if you like, that it can be of just chucking money to keep these buildings somehow going. It would be much better to make the buildings as safe as possible.

One of the things that did strike me, coming back to the time when we took Public Health England and the Secretary of State around the Palladium, there were some pretty extraordinary things said. One of them came from Public Health England, saying that it had done research in its office and people will not want to wear masks in theatres, to which I did make the point, "In that case, they do not need to come, do they?" but I think what we have found is that theatregoers tend to be a very responsible bunch and I think you would find even in smaller venues, certainly theatre venues, that people would be very respectful of all the various measures that need to be taken and put in place.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** I think that is an important point. There was a challenge there, Public Health England not being prepared to look at mitigations with us and us wanting to very much do that work with them. What is encouraging is that Oliver Dowden is now speaking very publicly and very positively about finding out and working with us to explain and clarify and then confirm what those mitigations are. If we understand what he has said over the weekend, he understands, and like us wants to get theatres open. As we keep saying, what we need is a date.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Self-sanitising door handles, for example.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** We have those.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** It is something we have in all our buildings. They are a very effective and relatively cheap thing to install.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** I think it is very true. We have demonstrated that we can open theatres safely. To answer your question, that will be done in a way that is possible for every venue up and down the country.



**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Hygiene is vitally important, backstage and testing. That is what they have been able to do very effectively in Korea.

Q9 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you, Lord Lloyd-Webber. Rebecca, you mentioned the ranking system. It is a discussion I have had with arts organisations in my own constituency, similar to the food hygiene rating, where a venue would be ranked 1 to 5, depending on how much mitigation it can put in place. I am very happy to see you are having those discussions with DCMS, because it is something that has been raised with me directly.

On the matter of putting in the safety and security measures in your venue, you can put all the measures in place, but if having a limited audience back is not economically viable, then it is essentially a non-starter for the vast majority of venues and for the live music industry as well. What was the value of running the pilot overall and do you not think that the key issue should have been making sure that we can get audiences back to full capacity? In running the pilot, do you see that as taking away some of the key advantages and challenges of that?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** I think it is unfortunate that that pilot was not seen as, as you say, the cornerstone of getting fully reopened. There were all of those conditionalities that were going on outside of our own sector. There is an awful lot going on and we are learning an awful lot more about Covid each day that rolls on, in understanding how this virus works. Taking away those external factors, we sort of understand what happened, but for us as an industry incredibly frustrating. I think that was the cornerstone; I think it is the benchmark. I think it set a very high standard. We did everything we could to demonstrate that that pilot meant that you could reopen.

Hopefully now with what we are hearing over the weekend perhaps the Government have realised and understood and now see the economic impact of not having theatres open. City centres, the West End, town centres up and down the country are completely decimated. People need reasons to come into town centres. A lot of our shows rely on a huge swathe of tourism and tourists propping up those shows. We do not see tourism coming back until we, as a population, can feel comfortable going into our own city centres.

Yes, it is frustrating that the pilot did not give the green light for stage 5. We do not know an awful lot of the detail of what sits behind Operation Sleeping Beauty. It was shared with us last week. We are working very keenly with the Government. Every day we are on calls with them to understand how we can support that initiative. If Sleeping Beauty is about reopening with no social distancing, that is fantastic. We will support everything and do everything that we can to support that, but we do need a date and we do need to start planning. It makes us slightly nervous that we have also heard that there is an aspiration to review social distancing in November. That puts Lord Lloyd-Webber's shows that are opening up in the New Year under jeopardy. That will push back the



reopening of our sector until the summer at the earliest. We will have been shut for over a year by then. There are hundreds of thousands of people who are self-employed, freelancers, with no money coming in and it would be absolutely devastating for those people.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** I have an example of that. I am sure the Musicians' Union will have something to say about this, but one of the finest viola players I know, who has played the Walton Concerto, I saw her the other day and I said, "What are you doing?" and she said, "I am working in a supermarket" and this is beyond everything now. We simply have to get our arts sector back open and running. Britain is the leader in world theatre in many ways, in my view, and we have to use this opportunity not only to say that we want to get our sector open, but to demonstrate to the world how it can be open. I think we are now at the point of no return.

**Q10 Damian Hinds:** Lord Lloyd-Webber, you offered a few moments ago to run down the list of what the measures would be for that demonstrator of operating at capacity or near capacity. It strikes me there are some natural measures with theatres, like the fact you are dealing with very responsible audiences and crucially the fact that everyone is sitting down in rows with almost everybody facing the same way, not facing each other. You mentioned some of the other hygiene measures. Could you run through the list of what are the things that you think make it safe to operate at capacity? Is there anywhere in the world that you have seen that happen? The Korea thing strikes me as relying a lot on a very different public attitude towards data collection and tracking and so on, but specifically these in-theatre safety measures, where is the exemplar to look at?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Korea of course has all of those. I am going to ask Rebecca to run through them all, but the most important thing that one takes away from Korea is hygiene and the very strict protocols that they have, backstage and for front of house.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** If we start right from the beginning, one of the benefits that theatre has over any other sector is that the tracing and testing and the contact information that you have for an individual is already there, because we are a ticketed organisation and you sit in a seat that is allocated. I know exactly who is coming into the building, I know exactly where they are going to be sitting and therefore I have communication and the ability to ask questions before someone even comes to the building. If that then eventually integrates into a test and trace system that the Government and the NHS are running, fantastic. At the moment we can do health questionnaires and we can ask people questions.

For "Phantom of the Opera" in Seoul, that is absolutely what is asked of people. You are asked to declare the state of your health before you come into that building; you are asked to fill out a questionnaire. We have seen that being used elsewhere, in doctors' surgeries and so on in



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this country. I think the public rely on that and recognise the benefit of that. Once you are at the building, having gone through those steps and declared yourself as safe and healthy and fit to come in, we have everything from what you would expect, so thermal imaging on the door in terms of doing a quick temperature test. If temperatures are high there are a series of quick follow-up questions just to understand why that might be the case.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** That is a very efficient system. It is not like you just find in a pub or a restaurant.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** No, it is a thermal imaging system. It captures everybody's image as they come into the building. It is also used in counter-terrorism, so it is something that we, as venues, understand as a system and an effective measure. There will be hand-sanitising, so you are encouraged to keep your own personal hygiene to a high level. We have also then introduced lots of different systems whereby personal contact is reduced, for example, contactless ticketing, paying for drinks in advance, having in-seat service, so minimising the amount of time spent in queues or spent in proximity. Obviously in most auditoria venues around this country, the tighter areas are in the bars and the toilets and those spaces, but again we demonstrated in the Palladium pilot that that can be managed efficiently. It takes a bit more staffing, but if we are not socially distancing and you are wearing a face mask, we believe that it is safe to be in that environment. I think the face mask is key.

We commissioned a series of top scientists in this country, led by Professor Galione, to look at the science behind how people sit in theatres, to touch on your point. We often talk about it being very akin to being in an aeroplane. As we all know, we can fly at the moment. The point is you are seated in a very regimented way. It is very easy to manage, the distance between you and the other bubble or household, if you like, that you are sitting close to. Of course when you have people in front of you, even if you are wearing a face mask, you are not breathing into the face of somebody in front of you; you are breathing down the back of somebody's neck. In terms of mitigation and the science and the multi-layering that can happen, we believe there is a lot of science and logistics that sit behind a practical operation that can run and does make theatres safe.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Can you go into the details of the fogging, the self-sanitising of door handles, all of these?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Sure. Again, when you are walking around the building, as Lord Lloyd-Webber said, you are not spreading. If somebody is spreading because they are asymptomatic and they do not realise they are ill, we have the self-ion hygiene handles on all the doors, so any pressure plates or things that get touched regularly, we have increased all our cleaning regimes. As I mentioned earlier, we are also doing the fogging at the Palladium. That is not an inexpensive thing to do, but we



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believe that is the right measure for a building of the London Palladium's stature. Hopefully in time we will not need to use all of those mitigations, but we believe that by having demonstrated that multi-layering approach to every single facet of that building that we can run it safely.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Backstage all of those measures apply, and testing of the cast, crew, backstage crew and the orchestras, obviously. They can be tested as regularly as one wants.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** You can decide on the regularity of what you do, and of course with different testing regimes coming on to the market—

**Chair:** Thank you for that. That is an extensive and very interesting explanation of the measures that you propose for the sector and we will take serious note of those. I am going to move on to our next question.

Q11 **Julie Elliott:** Good morning, Lord Lloyd-Webber and Rebecca. It is interesting listening to the evidence you have given so far. How did audiences respond to the pilot in August?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Really well. There was the elation of the doors opening and that was fabulous for everybody in our sector.

Q12 **Julie Elliott:** Did people have to come in in a staggered way some time before the performances?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** They did. We had timed ticketing, we had timed entry points, we had staff out there managing the flow of people coming in. People were incredibly well-behaved. I think that is the point with people coming to theatres and venues for live and performing arts, people understand. There is always a sense of etiquette when you come to any show and we can manage that.

Q13 **Julie Elliott:** Did you do any feedback from people who attended and what did that feedback say in terms of audience experience?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** There was obviously a lot of comment about the face masks. A lot of people were very—

Q14 **Julie Elliott:** What type of comment?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** People were nervous in advance that they would find that uncomfortable. The comments we received afterwards were, "If it takes wearing a face mask to get theatres reopened again, I will wear a face mask". Our pilot was back in July. That was before face masks were made mandatory on public transport, so I think culturally as a country we have adopted and have had to adapt to a face mask. The overwhelming response was, "I did not like the idea of it, but I will do it and I will do it if it gets the sector reopened".

Q15 **Julie Elliott:** Can I ask about the people who came to the pilot? Were they people who work or are involved in the theatre industry or was it just random people?



**Rebecca Kane Burton:** No, we were very clear with the Government at the time that we wanted it to be a genuine pilot. We went out to the database of people who had bought tickets from LW Theatres before. It was a very difficult decision, but we purposely did not invite any of our staff because we wanted to demonstrate to Government that this is an audience that go to theatre, but it is not an audience that is employed by theatre. We wanted to get as genuine a response as possible. We used all our social channels as well and we went out to a wide base, but as I said, we did not have employees or people directly impacted in the building.

Q16 **Julie Elliott:** The evidence I have had, and it is purely anecdotal from people who I know who went along to the pilot—who are very keen, I have to say, to get theatre back up and running—the types of comments that they made to me are there was no atmosphere, they were in seats a long time, there was no spontaneity, not a pleasant experience. Did that come through in your survey?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Completely. To answer your question, in terms of how we managed it, big tick. In terms of what it did and what it does for the environment and the auditorium, no actor, performer or somebody in the sector wants to come out to that. That is a challenge because you want to interact and engage and that was very challenging.

Q17 **Julie Elliott:** If we want people to come back into theatre and into entertainment spaces, which we absolutely do—all of us have theatres, and Sunderland has a very thriving theatre and arts community, and we all want it back up and running—given the pilot where people said it was not that pleasant but that they are very keen to get back, then, realistically, how do you think that will translate into the willingness of ordinary people who perhaps do not go to the theatre very often to come back in and have trust and faith to come back in and watch performances?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** It goes to the core of what we are saying. We do not want to open theatres on a socially distanced basis, so all of those comments are absolutely right, but those comments are very pertinent to a show that is being run on 30% capacity. I have no intention of opening buildings on Lord Lloyd-Webber's behalf at 30% capacity. It does not work for the audience and it does not work for us as a sector.

Q18 **Julie Elliott:** If we take that step, some of the things you have been talking about, I think the idea of a kite mark thing is good. It strikes me that some of the things that you are talking about—fogging, self-sanitising door handles—a lot of those things are probably very expensive and certainly in theatres outside of London the balance between being able to be economically viable or not is tiny. How expensive are things like self-sanitising door handles and how realistic do you think that is in theatres outside London that run on much tighter margins?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** As I said earlier, there is a whole raft of measures. The point is if you do not have self-sanitising door handles,



having hand sanitiser every few feet within your venue is as effective as having those door handles. We are in a position where we have been able to put those in and we wanted to test how people responded to that. You could just put an extra cleaner on and you could just have lots of hand sanitiser around. Arguably that is going to have the same effect.

To your point, I think it all goes back to customer confidence. The customer has to feel confident that they want to come into that environment. I think we have lots of examples around the country in lots of other sectors where people are very confident to go back out and about and be mingling and enjoying activity. I hope that confidence spins through into theatre by us demonstrating we are on top of our game. We are professionals, we are incredibly diligent, we know how to run a tight ship, but at the same time there are mitigations that, as you say, do not cost the earth to enable more venues to open.

**Q19 Julie Elliott:** Lord Lloyd-Webber, can I pick up on something you said before, which is going slightly off what I was intending to ask about? You talked about producers and you have talked about the number of self-employed freelancers not fitting into any scheme, in effect, and having to take other work. We have talked about this at length in our Committee and lobbied Government heavily on this area, but as you say, if things are not there ready to put on stage then there is no theatre opening. What do you think the Government could be doing to support that? It seems to me at the moment the Government are quite keen and have introduced things that seem to be supporting bricks and mortar, but not necessarily supporting production. Would you like to comment on that?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** I could not agree with you more, first of all. There are two things that producers need and obviously the first one is a date. Wearing my producing hat for my new show "Cinderella", I have to have a date; I have to know.

The second thing I think the Government could do, which would be of enormous practical help, would be to help the theatre area with insurance, with a little bit of help here. We all accept, do we not, that if Covid-19 becomes really serious again that we would have to close? We understand that, but I think some help for producers to feel that in that event they could be covered. I do not want to get into the whole argy-bargy that is going on with the insurance business at the moment, where a lot of people feel that they were covered and the insurance business is not paying out, but I think that would be a very important measure too, but we, above everything else, need a date.

**Q20 Clive Efford:** You have talked about the measures you have taken inside the theatre, but it is also about getting people to and from theatres and the crowding outside as people go in and mingle. I am thinking about the West End in places like Shaftesbury Avenue and Old Compton Street, where there are several theatres. It is like a football crowd when people are going in and coming out. How much consideration have you given to the risks that are posed by large bodies of people congregating at similar



times to enter and leave theatres?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** It depends I suppose in which timeframe we are talking. If we are talking about not being able to reopen theatres with social distancing, then those issues disappear at the point when we can open and social distancing is not a concern. If I talk about the here and now and what is happening under stage 4 and those buildings are able to open, it is very easy to manage all of that. As we said earlier, with the pilot at the Palladium we had timed entry, so we staggered it. We are fortunate because Argyll Street is quite a wide street and Westminster were very supportive of letting us use the space outside the Palladium to stagger that entry.

To some extent though some of that is no different to what we manage on a day-to-day basis. When we have a star like Madonna in, Madonna might have 10 different VIP packages and different priorities for different celebrities coming in and out of that building. We manage that sort of risk on a day-to-day basis to the point where no one would notice that because of how we manage risk and how we manage entry in and out of the building.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** It might be worth touching on measures that we have been advised about regarding terrorism in that regard. About a project that in fact we did not pursue, I was advised the most difficult moment is not people coming in or crowds of people going in, it is the fact that they all leave in a body. That too is something that we can control. There will have to be—I hate to say the cliché—the “new normal” but there will be a new normal obviously for theatre and live entertainment. It does not seem to be followed, I must say, when you see people drinking in the streets outside pubs, but we cannot control that. That is something we cannot do.

You mentioned Old Compton Street. I think there is only one theatre in Old Compton Street, but Shaftesbury Avenue I do not think people tend to linger around there. It is an issue, I agree with you, but we can control audiences, we can control what they do, their entry and their exit, but we cannot control pubs.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** That is the advantage we have as a theatre over a pub. We know exactly who is coming and when and we have great means of communicating with them. In terms of measures and sharing that and managing the audience, that is a huge advantage that any venue has over a restaurant or a pub who do not know who is turning up on the day. One of the things I have talked to Westminster about is the school scheme that they have had, so in terms of the local authorities giving extra permission for a bit of additional space on the foreground before you come into a theatre; can you use it in the same way that schools are? Schools have to manage multiple drop-offs and maintain social distancing and there is an opportunity to do that, but as we have said, hopefully when we reopen—and reopen with a bang—we are doing it without social distancing and all of those issues disappear.



Q21 **Clive Efford:** We have seen that people are reluctant to go to town centres and some town centres have taken measures to expand the pavement space and take back bits of the road. Thinking of a place like the West End where there is a concentration and lots of theatres, so for people entering that area there are staggered openings and closing of theatres, do we need a strategy for an area like that to make people feel safer and encourage them back into the West End and feel that that is a place they feel safe to go? Is that something that you need to consider with Westminster Council?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Yes. It is something that Nickie Aiken, our local MP, has been looking at with her West End recovery plan, how do you help the West End recover? I know we have talked with her a lot about transportation, and I think that either comes from the Mayor or it comes from local MPs or local authorities to encourage people to use public transport again and then, to your point, feel safe and understand how they might navigate their way around city centres.

I know London has a big challenge. People tend to dive on to the Tube rather than realising that the place they are going is two minutes up the road. Maybe help and support in that sort of way and opening up London and its accessibility would be helpful in the current circumstances.

Q22 **Giles Watling:** Thank you for coming in today, I really appreciate it. I wanted to touch on the issue of confidence. I have been talking to Julian Bird a lot, the CEO of SOLT, the Society of London Theatres, and he said some weeks ago that Rome is burning and we need to get this money together. We were delighted to get the £1.57 billion to the cultural sector, but I do not believe as yet that it is being disseminated well enough. How concerned are you about the grass roots out there?

I just put in parentheses here I used to run a couple of small theatres and we had to have between 85% and 87% to break even. Those theatres cannot ever socially distance and open and we might lose the feeders. I hear that the Plymouth Theatre Royal is laying people off, the Theatre Royal, Norwich, is laying people off. We have already lost the Nuffield in Southampton. It is desperate in the provinces and they are your feeders [*inaudible*] disseminating money to those theatres now?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** I could not agree with you more, and that is one of the reasons why I think it is so vital that the money that has been designated, the £1.57 billion, some of that should be going to those theatres to give them the wherewithal to be able to reopen safely. I could not agree with you more. We are not just talking about the West End here. We are talking about theatres all over Britain and all over the world, to be frank.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Absolutely. It goes back to the point that it is stimulus, not aid, that is needed in the short term. It is great that some buildings are getting money, but effectively they are being given money to keep the lights off. That is a short-term measure and the bigger



longer-term challenge that we have as a sector is we need a pipeline of goods. As somebody who has been booking venues for 25 years of my career, I understand very strongly the strength of the pipeline that you need, because you need to make choices about the content coming in and the difficulty of not then funding some of those production houses or giving them the confidence to go about even just stating ideas about shows they might put on in a year's time. Huge musicals can be five, six, seven years in gestation. Not Lord Lloyd-Webber's, he works a lot quicker than that.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Well, certainly three.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Three years, and they take a long time. There is a concern that we have that the industry is haemorrhaging people. Talent is being haemorrhaged out of this sector as we speak because Julian is quite right, we often talk about while we are fiddling Rome is burning. It does feel very much like that at the moment, but it goes back to our central point. We need a date for reopening, we need stimulus, we need to be able to plan as an industry and we need to reassure those 300,000 people who work in theatre alone that there is still a job to do, there is a job to come back to. As a country it is our biggest asset. If we do not lead the way, who else will?

Q23 **Giles Watling:** It is worth shouting of course that we have already lost the panto season across the country. That date has not come soon enough and it is also worth shouting that that season represents 80% of the income for many of the regional theatres. We have been devastated there.

Another thing that concerns me, and you have touched upon it there, Rebecca, is we are going to lose talent. You mentioned, Lord Lloyd-Webber, a viola player who you found working in a shop somewhere. We are going to lose talent, we are going to lose costumiers, actors, performers of various sorts and we are going to lose stage management, the technical people, the prop builders. We are going to lose all of that. How do you think we can hang on to those people? Is it going to have to be in an extended furlough scheme?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** I think it is a mixture of both. We have been incredibly fortunate with the furlough scheme, but it ends in October. I think that is why we were all hoping that by October we would know when we were reopening, because people can hold on for so long, but only if they have certainty. It is much worse when you look to the freelancers and the self-employed and they make up the majority of our workforce. As I said earlier, we are uniquely vulnerable as a country because of the strength, with over 1 million people in this sector, and yet you look around Europe and you look at the examples of other governments and their aid and their packages and their support to the people in the creative arts has continued and will continue until they reopen. I would urge Government to rethink their stance on this. As a world leader we are being undermined by ourselves at the moment and if



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we do not lead the charge and we do not keep these people in, they will either move or go abroad or they will leave our sector completely and we will be culturally bereft because of that.

**Q24 Giles Watling:** There is one final question I would like to ask you. Because we have had this enforced closure of so many of our venues, do you think that some of that £1.57 billion should be spent to more than just mothball theatres, but make them super-fit so that they are ready to come back?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Yes.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Absolutely.

**Q25 Giles Watling:** We put air-conditioning in, we upgrade the seating, we do all the rest of it?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** I completely agree. We are not asking for money, but I think the theatres that need it and the venues that need it should get it. As Rebecca said, there is no point in just giving money to buildings to keep the lights on. It is a complete waste of money, but to put it into the infrastructure that theatres might need to be able to safely reopen has to be a sensible idea. It is blindingly obvious. I talked about that with the Secretary of State at the Palladium and that was before this announcement. I could not agree more. I think some of this money should be directed to getting the buildings open so we can get back and get our sector employed again.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, Lord Lloyd-Webber. I think we did cover that matter as well earlier in the session. It is very interesting.

**Q26 Damian Green:** Good morning, both. We have had a slight reference to this already, but I read in one of the earlier meetings with the Government, Lord Lloyd-Webber, you asked a very powerful question why theatres are different from aeroplanes, in that the Government are actively encouraging people to go and sit on aeroplanes when they can safely. Have you ever had a satisfactory answer to that very good question?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** No, I have not had a satisfactory answer. It reminds me of something I heard over the weekend of a young man who went into rehab because of alcoholism who came out and discovered that his Alcoholics Anonymous meetings had been cancelled, but he could go to the pub. There are so many anomalies that it is just extraordinary. Nobody ever answered that point, to the best of my knowledge.

**Q27 Damian Green:** Are you continuing to ask it? Indeed, should we be asking it?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** I continue to ask and I continue to get silence.

**Q28 Damian Green:** Proceeding from that, I get the strong impression of what you want—apart from the fact you have agreed you cannot do



sensible socially distanced theatre because it is just not viable, what you want therefore is a date. Would it be satisfactory, because it seems to be more realistic, if what you might get is a “not before” date? The Government will say, “We can look ahead so far, but not further than that”. Frankly, being pessimistic about this, looking at the news from the last couple of days where the Covid numbers seem to be going the wrong way, if the Government said something like, “We know you will not be able to have it until 1 February” or something like that, would that be better than the current situation?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** It kind of is the current situation, because what they have said is, “It is our aspiration in the beginning of November to give you a date” which is really the same thing. I take the point completely. The other way of looking at it, as one or two theatre owners have done, which is not the way I would like to do it, is shut the theatres up completely, get rid of all of the staff and just say, “We are going to wait for a vaccine”. I have enrolled myself on the Oxford Vaccine programme and I am delighted to say that they seem quite optimistic, but it is obviously going to be a while before that happens. I do not know how to answer that question, because that is kind of where we are.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** It is. I think the problem with that suggestion is that it goes back to confidence. In staging shows, you need to have the confidence to go into that market and put a show on. There is a huge amount of risk and currently with no insurance on the table and not even having certainty around dates and planning, that does not put any producer or any theatre owner into a good position. While it might look marginally better, as Lord Lloyd-Webber said, it is not a step forward and it does not give the confidence that is needed within our sector that we are going to be given permission.

We have to hang our hat on what we heard at the weekend, which is that there is substance behind what the Government are now saying about their ambition and their aspiration to get open. To be very clear, if we were told we could open tomorrow there are no shows ready to go live tomorrow. You do not turn this on and off like a tap. That is why we need that date and then we will plan and we will work with Government to get our sector back up and thriving again, but we need that certainty.

Q29 **Kevin Brennan:** Have you considered putting on a production on a plane, Lord Lloyd-Webber?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** A very interesting idea. We would have to find out how we can put a stage on a plane. It could be quite a good thought. We did think of turning the London Palladium into a garden centre at one point.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** We did. Again, to get people employed we are looking at everything and anything. We want to be back.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** A plane in a theatre.



**Rebecca Kane Burton:** A plane in a theatre. There you are.

Q30 **Kevin Brennan:** I am obviously being slightly flippant, for anybody who might be watching, but it does highlight the ludicrous nature of what my colleague was saying earlier on about the fact that the Government will not give any explanation for this. I was reading the Secretary of State's article in *The Mail on Sunday* this weekend and I do not know about you, but it strikes me that most of it is a lot of flim-flam. Do you feel that you have been strung along by the Secretary of State in relation to this pilot that you ran? He is talking in this article about, "Mass indoor events are now in my sights". Should they not have been in his sights months ago and serious planning being made about how it would be possible or am I right in thinking that the Government basically put all their eggs in the vaccine basket and they think that is going to come to the rescue eventually?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** I do feel that Oliver Dowden, the Secretary of State, has been doing everything that he can to help our sector. He obviously has an awful lot on his plate with all the other things he is responsible for, but I do believe that he has been doing his best. I think that he has been facing an uphill struggle, not least of which I think is probably dealing with Public Health England. Some of the remarks that we heard from Public Health England I do not even want to embarrass everybody by saying. I think in his way he is trying to do everything he can for us, but I think he has been up against a brick wall that is certainly not of his making.

Q31 **Kevin Brennan:** You mentioned your new production of "Cinderella" earlier on. I notice in the *Mail on Sunday* article that Oliver Dowden is talking about his new production, Operation Sleeping Beauty. Am I right in thinking that it took 100 years for Sleeping Beauty to be reawakened by Prince Charming?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Is it Prince Charming?

Q32 **Kevin Brennan:** Maybe it is not. Whoever it was, it was some prince or other anyway, somebody with a title.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** It relied on a man.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Yes, 100 years is not going to be terribly good for me. I do not know that I will be around in 100 years' time. We have to have a date. It comes back to that and let us not beat around the bush. With my new production, I am incredibly excited by some of the actors I have seen. I have seen two kids of colour, and I think one of them might well end up being in one of the lead roles. What do I say to them? I just say, "Look, I want to cast you, but I cannot". That is how devastating it is for people like me who passionately care about this profession. For over 50 years it has been the thing that I have loved, I have been lucky enough to do, but right now we have hit a brick wall.

**Kevin Brennan:** I will close by saying that I have been slightly frivolous,



but it is deeply serious, the issue. I do not see the evidence, I do not think, from what you have said and from what I have read that the Government have been planning for many months for full reopening. I think they are just relying on the vaccine and I think that is what the evidence shows, but I will hand back to you, Chair.

**Q33 Steve Brine:** Good morning, both, and thanks for your time. Picking up a few threads, Rebecca, I guess it is a chicken and egg argument, is it not? You say that city centres are decimated, and that give people a reason to come and they will come. Of course I am sure you received a very positive response from those who you wrote out to and asked whether they wanted to come as part of the trial, but do you have any wider opinion data that could be scaled up as to the desire of audiences to come back into city centres and to sit in theatres?

I was reading the Secretary of State's article in the weekend and it talks about quick turnaround testing, where on-the-day coronavirus tests could give people who test negative a pass to visit the theatre that evening and sit there in a mask and pre-order the drinks. It is a right old faff, is it not? At the end of the day, people do not order a theatre ticket that day for that evening. People book them a year in advance as part of family celebrations. Do you have any wider opinion data that you can share with us as to the desire of the punters to come back?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** There is an awful lot of surveying going on. If I turn to one of our close colleagues who also works in the sector, the Ambassador Theatre Group, it is surveying people on a weekly basis and every single week it sees an increase increment of 2% or 3%. I think it is now at 70% of its audience saying, "We want to come back". You can look at the data that perhaps somewhere like Visit London and, for the UK, VisitBritain are doing in terms of tourism and appetite for that. I think there is a lot of data out there that specifically talks to and looks at people's appetite for coming back in.

I think the reality is people are craving this, because we can see that with sales. Already, as I mentioned, the pilot. If I can just clear up one point, I think there was some confusion earlier, the pilot was never intended to be a socially distanced pilot. Yes, it would have been lovely if that would have given the Government the confidence to go straight to stage 5 and fully reopen, but that pilot was always based on a socially distanced audience. We knew that was what we were getting into, but I think it made all the earlier points that we shared. The point of that pilot and the point of going on sale with things—we have gone on sale with a new musical this morning and the tickets are flying out the door—is that people do want to be entertained. People do want to come out of their houses and people do want to get back to—I hate the phrase—whatever that "new normal" looks like. I think the reality is there in ticket sales and frustration and people's support of what we are doing this morning, the amount of supportive messages we have had about getting our sector back up and running, but let us not forget it always comes back to over 1 million people being employed in this sector. This is not about a little bit



of inconvenience of wearing a face mask. This is about reigniting an industry to get 1 million people back to work. That is the important point.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** I was very impressed. I went to go and see the concert version of “Jesus Christ Superstar” in Regent’s Park open air theatre, and of course it is open air, but the audiences were absolutely wearing their face masks to a man. There was no interval in that case either, so people were sitting through 100 minutes, basically, and there were no complaints and no issues. The only comments I was getting from the audience was, “Oh, we wish we could have had other people in here so that the atmosphere could have been what it should have been”.

Q34 **Steve Brine:** Finally, you talk about needing a date. Isn’t it the truth—and this is not exclusive to this sector—that everybody says they want clarity on all sorts of matters, but what they mean is they want certainty? A date is certainty. The truth is, and I say this as a former Public Health Minister as much as a member of this Committee, that pandemics by their very nature do not allow for certainty. That is why they are such a bugger. Do you accept that certainty is difficult and if you get a date and if you get reopened, given that we have had just short of 3,000 cases over the last two days, there is an element of risk? Of course there is in crossing Shaftesbury Avenue on any day of the week, there is a risk to being out and about full stop, but do you accept that there is an element of risk in what you are proposing?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Let us talk about risk in its wider sense. We work in the risk industry. A producer takes a risk from the very first moment that they have the genesis of an idea that they think other people want to see and like and then they have to persuade investors to stick £10 million into putting that on stage.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** If it is a musical, yes.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** If it is a musical, but they then spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on marketing on the reliance that somebody will turn up to a show. We do risk day in, day out. That is the very nature of what we do as a sector and the risks largely pay off, but there are huge risks there. I think the point in terms of that in a pandemic context is there are certain producers who are, yes, prepared to take those risks on. The danger I think we have is although the Secretary of State’s ambition is fantastic and we will support him, there are very few producers who in the current context will take on a risk to put something on at Christmas. We know a few. We work with a couple of producers, Michael Harrison being a fantastic flag-bearer for being prepared to take on risk, but there is only so far that risk will extend. If there is no insurance or any other backup, he is taking an inordinate risk to put on pantomime, if he is able to do that, but there are people who will do that. It is about planning.

Q35 **Steve Brine:** I understand you are talking about producers financially taking a risk in putting on a show. I understand there is a huge amount of risk in doing that. I am saying that there is an element of public health



risk to reopening the theatres. Even with all of the mitigation measures that you have said, there is an element of risk to that. For all the reasons that you have outlined so eloquently, it may be a risk worth taking, but there is an element of public health risk to it, isn't there?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** There is to everything. It is just a question of assessing whether or not the relationship of risk to reward is right.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** One million people are out of work at the moment. That is also a huge risk to a huge swathe of our population.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Not to mention all of the restaurants and the hotels. If you walk around Covent Garden at the moment, you might be walking around a morgue.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Of course we understand risk. Some of those producers recognise that if there were a second spike for reasons and we had to close, we would have to close. We have no intention of putting people at risk.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** But that is a decision for Government, isn't it? It is not a decision for us.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** No.

Q36 **John Nicolson:** Thank you both for coming in. You have given us some apocalyptic warnings. I am a journalist by profession and I have been writing down some of your quotes, "Talent is being haemorrhaged" and, Lord Lloyd-Webber, you said, "Theatre is at the point of no return". You made an interesting point, which I guess people who are not involved in the industry will not realise, which is that shows are three years in gestation and you cannot just open a show immediately if you are given the go-ahead to. I would be interested to know if you were given the go-ahead tomorrow to open a show, when would that show open?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Let's consider an existing production. I have been talking about musicals with a three-year gestation. That is quite quick for a musical and there are many areas of theatre that are quicker than that. But let's just take "Phantom of the Opera" because it is an easy one for me to talk about. It would take a minimum of three or four months, I would reckon now, to get it back up again, to re-rehearse. You have to consider that a production like that is quite complex and you have to think of the safety of everybody, the health and safety requirements. You have to rehearse your actors properly. I reckon we would need to have a new orchestra now. My guess is that it would take between three and four months.

A new musical coming from scratch would be longer. If we were allowed to go ahead with my show now, the earliest we could start rehearsals would be January. We have a cast. That is another thing. We are doing the best we can at the moment with socially distanced auditions, but in



the end we have a cast that we have to play the scenes off and see that they work and all of that. That has to be six months.

Q37 **John Nicolson:** What percentage of your staff who would be working on that new show are currently furloughed?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** They aren't because it is a new show and they are not hired. We were supposed to be opening next week, but it was put back and put back and put back.

Q38 **John Nicolson:** Did you furlough staff who were working in preparation for that show that was due to be opening next week?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** No, apart from the people working in my production office, who were not furloughed. We are waiting to press the button for the majority of the people, the actors, musicians, backstage crew, set builders and everything, so the furlough scheme is not relevant.

Q39 **John Nicolson:** You do not have anybody who is currently furloughed who was working in preparation for the show that you have in the pipeline?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** No, because by definition it is in the pipeline and the button has not been pushed. Had that happened, I do not know where we would have gone. I think probably we would say that we would not be able to open, but it did not, so the answer is no.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** That goes back to our point about the opening date. For Lord Lloyd-Webber to realise his ambition of opening "Cinderella" in April of next year, the sooner we are given certainty that theatres are able to reopen that button will be pressed and a whole load of people will be reemployed.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** April is the latest date it has been put back to. Coming back to a point I made earlier, one of the heart-breaking things is to look the young actors coming straight out of drama school in the eyes and say, "I cannot employ you".

Q40 **John Nicolson:** I am pursuing the furlough thing because I get so many letters from constituents telling me that they think their businesses, whether in the arts sector or elsewhere, will be destroyed if the furlough scheme is not extended. Can I confirm: you do not have any staff at all on furlough?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** That is a different thing altogether. You asked me about the new show, so the answer about the new show is, no, there is nobody involved with that on furlough. But, Rebecca, you probably should take over on the theatre side.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** From an LW Theatres perspective, we employ 600 or 700 people across the seven theatres that we operate, so furlough has been invaluable as a lifeline for those people. Our concern is that furlough ends in October. There is a huge amount of financial investment



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already in those buildings. As Lord Lloyd-Webber mentioned earlier, we are in the middle of a £60 million refurb of Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. We are spending millions month on month and furlough coming to an end puts people in a very devastating position if I cannot guarantee them work again.

Q41 **John Nicolson:** How many people do you have on furlough?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** I think we are on about 60% on furlough.

Q42 **John Nicolson:** It is a very high percentage.

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** It is front of house who cannot work. They are front of house, bar staff. Their jobs rely on us being open and trading.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Some have had to be made redundant, have they not?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** Yes. There are redundancies in there as well.

Q43 **John Nicolson:** I am trying to understand what kind of people are on furlough. It is front of house staff, bar staff. Are there creative people? Are there any managers?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** No. The large proportion of our head office is fully employed, not least because of Lord Lloyd-Webber's ambition of reopening. We have three buildings with major building works going on at the moment. That takes management and care, so my entire property team, my entire senior management team, the marketing team, everybody is fully engaged and fully working. We have closed buildings to relaunch and reopen.

Q44 **John Nicolson:** There is nobody who you have furloughed who could be working on future shows?

**Rebecca Kane Burton:** No.

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Not on productions, no.

Q45 **John Nicolson:** In closing, if you had one single message for the UK Government, one plea in the closing moments of your evidence, what would that plea be?

**Lord Lloyd-Webber:** Give us a date.

**John Nicolson:** Thank you very much indeed.

**Chair:** That is a very good point to end on. Thank you to Lord Lloyd-Webber and Rebecca Kane Burton for your evidence today. It has been very interesting and illuminating. Thank you very much for that.

Q46 **Chair:** We are now going to move on to our second witness, who is Melvin Benn, Managing Director of Festival Republic. Good morning, Melvin.

**Melvin Benn:** Good morning, Chair.



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Q47 **Chair:** Good morning, and thank you for waiting. I know it was a bit longer than you were expecting, so we are very grateful that you have been able to stay online. Can you have music festivals with social distancing and what would be the consequences in viable terms if we do not find an alternative to social distancing?

**Melvin Benn:** It is a simple answer, Chair. The answer is no, you cannot have festivals with social distancing.

Q48 **Chair:** How do you do it then?

**Melvin Benn:** You mass test. In June I published a report or a plan, “The Full Capacity Plan”, which is based on testing people before they arrive at the festival or the event and creating an environment where everybody in the space has been tested and has tested negative in order to get an entry and therefore are unable to transmit the virus to other people because everybody in the space is tested and clear. That reduces the need—in fact, it gets rid of the need—for social distancing. When we were looking at testing in June, the speed of change in testing between June and now has been dramatic and testing is a real viable alternative.

There needs to be two plans. Plan A is a vaccine. A vaccine would be terrific if we had that, but we do not know for definite whether we will get it, we do not know whether the Covid-19 strain could be Covid-21 or anything like that. Plan B, which is an absolute certainty, is to test everybody and allow everybody who is clear of the virus to enter the venue and work at the venue or enter the festival and work at the festival and those who are carrying the virus are not allowed to enter.

Q49 **Chair:** How many people attend Glastonbury every year, on average?

**Melvin Benn:** Glastonbury is an interesting example for timing. Glastonbury has about 200,000 attend in a year.

Q50 **Chair:** How is it practical to test 200,000 people? I understand how it is practical within bubbles created in cricket and football, for example, where there may be a couple of hundred people in total being tested. How do you get from 200 or 300 to 200,000?

**Melvin Benn:** It would not be that difficult at all, Chair. We could go through two different ways or a mix of the two. I hope that in an ideal world there would be a self-test—and it appears to me that a self-test is around the corner, if not already here—and that people would self-test and do that on an app. There are three or four different apps that are working for this sort of thing. That would give them the all clear or the negative. The new NHS app, not the old NHS app, that Baroness Harding has been talking about is trialling in Newham and the Isle of Wight and among NHS personnel. The new NHS app is offering the QR code in order to enter the venues, so I think that very much works. In addition, we could have any number of locations. I have a plan for up to 600 locations around the UK where we could test people the day before they arrive and the app would give entry.



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Q51 **Chair:** You have some practical ideas. How you have been received within Government about trying to get them to look at the alternatives that you are putting forward?

**Melvin Benn:** We have had incredible engagement with the DCMS throughout the lockdown period, but it was engagement based on social distancing, reopening a venue, reopening a space with social distancing and that was a waste of time. As Rebecca and Lord Lloyd-Webber just explained, trying to open without full capacity is not an option. I presented the plan to the DCMS, who felt it was too big for it to deal with and that it needed to be dealt with by the Department of Health. I presented it to the Department of Health, who said, "We are in the middle of a pandemic. You need to present it to the DCMS". They were in the middle of a pandemic and it was difficult for them to be dealing with it, but it should not be any longer.

What we need to start with is a working group between DCMS, Public Health England, the Department of Health, the Treasury perhaps, and people like Rebecca and myself and one or two others to plan how we can reopen at full capacity. We had engagement, but it was engagement with a singular focus around social distancing that did not work.

Q52 **Chair:** This chimes with the Committee because as part of the report that we did prior to recess we suggested that one of the problems is that DCMS does not quite carry the weight that it ought to within Whitehall. You made the very interesting comment that it felt it was too big for it as an issue because of the enormous consequences that flow from opening an area of the economy such as yours.

**Melvin Benn:** That was an actual statement, Chair, and that said it all. The live entertainment sector is worth about £11.5 billion to the UK economy and it seemed a little bit of a shame that we were not being listened to by people who needed to listen to us.

Q53 **Chair:** This weekend the Culture Secretary talked about getting mass gatherings again, opening up different sectors and venues. Is there anything in what he has said that has given you more hope?

**Melvin Benn:** Of course, yes. There is no question. If you have a Government Minister saying that they hope to have full houses of theatres for pantomime for Christmas, of course we would have hope. I am not seeing the engagement with us as the music industry or, as Rebecca was saying, them as the theatre sector about how we would get open for Christmas. It would be wonderful.

What I am slightly more interested in, if I am brutally honest with you, is Project Moonshot from the Department of Health, for example, with the idea, it has been said, of up to 4 million people tested per day. That would be extraordinary. Is there enough incentive for 4 million people to go and get tested at the moment? I do not feel that there is. Yesterday I had meetings in Brighton about one of our festivals, The Great Escape, which is due to happen early next year. I got on the train from where I



live in Richmond; I went all the way down; I had meetings in the hotel. At no point did I need to have had a test to do any of that. We sat in a room, not dissimilar to the one you are sitting in now, and we socially distanced. We had nice cups of tea and great chats around planning, but at no point did I need to do anything.

Until the live sector in particular is allowed to reopen there will be no incentive, but the live sector, be it sport or culture, music, theatre and so on, offers an opportunity to essentially force people to be tested because it allows us to say, "Part of the condition of entry is that you have a negative test for Covid".

Q54 **Kevin Brennan:** Welcome, Melvin. Do you get the sense, as I was alluding to earlier, that the Government are not taking your proposal or similar proposals at all seriously and in fact are relying on a vaccine arriving fairly soon and solving the problem?

**Melvin Benn:** I have felt that throughout, if I am being honest with you. I felt from day one that the Government were hoping that the vaccine would come through. My projection is that they were saying that the vaccine would be coming through in October or November and that that would solve the problem. I think it would solve the problem, at least in sufficient numbers to be able to protect the old and the vulnerable, and perhaps if the old and the vulnerable were sufficiently protected, Public Health England and the Department of Health may take the view that the rest of us can take our chances a little. But I think if you were to take the vaccine and general mass testing or testing under "The Full Capacity Plan" or some conditional entry plan, you have a strong reason to be opening the economy.

The reality is that I think you can do that with the testing even if the vaccine does not come through, but I believe the Government are very confident about the vaccine. Listening to people like Professor John Bell from the Oxford University group talking about it, he gives us great confidence that it will come through. He also gave me great confidence in an interview two or three weeks ago when he said that he can see in the not too distant future us all testing ourselves twice a week at home. I think the Government have a view that testing is a positive way forward. Unfortunately what they are not doing is sharing how that testing can work with the live entertainment sector so that we can begin to plan.

Q55 **Kevin Brennan:** It is ludicrous during a pandemic of this kind to suppose you could safely run an event where you bring 200,000 people together in a mass celebratory gathering, where there may or may not be illegal substances and legal substances taken that encourage disinhibited behaviour and so on, and you are relying upon them all to be tested to prevent that turning into a great public health disaster. How would you answer that?

**Melvin Benn:** I would say that we create environments where a degree of personal abandonment is there to be enjoyed, but we organise them in



incredibly safe ways. As you say, Glastonbury has 200,000 people. In the August bank holiday weekend just past, between Reading Festival, Leeds Festival, Creamfields and SW4 Festival we would have had over 300,000 people in four different fields on those three days and working with private companies that I am very confident would be capable of testing those 300,000 people sufficiently well to be able to allow them into the events and allow the abandonment that they ordinarily enjoy. I do not see it as difficult and this is the extraordinary thing. I genuinely do not see this as difficult. What is difficult is engagement between the DCMS, Department of Health and Public Health England. That seems to me to be more difficult than you asking me to create a safe environment for them in a field.

**Q56 Kevin Brennan:** Could you outline for the Committee—because I do not think it is always understood outside of those interested in this sector—the impact that all of this has had on people’s livelihoods and jobs and the scale of that?

**Melvin Benn:** The UK festival sector, just the festival sector, is worth around £2 billion revenue a year. That is the turnover generally per year. Over the course of a particular summer I would host around 2.5 million people over about 60 days of festivals and/or camping festivals. All of the people who attend do so because they desire more than just the music. They desire the community and that is hugely important. We are existing today in a digital world. We live in a digital world where our friends are registered online rather than in the pub or in the youth clubs, as they used to be.

The effect that that has on people’s mental health is very significant and festivals—and I say “festivals”, sporting events, theatres and so on—are place where communities of likeminded people come together. That is good for people’s mental health and social bonding. The impact on the customer has been absolutely phenomenal and we have seen the rise in cases of mental health that have been reported up and down the country. I think that the absence of being able to gather in communities has contributed to that.

For me as an employer and as a business, the whole of my turnover comes in a summer. The whole of my turnover, 100% of it, comes from hosting people in fields in the summer; 100% of that turnover for this year has disappeared. The consequential effects of that for staging companies, lighting companies, sound companies, security companies, medical providers and so on are huge. It means the whole of their turnover has disappeared for the year and the industry has been devastated.

**Q57 Kevin Brennan:** Thanks, Melvin. It is more than just 20,000 people standing in a field. Yes, okay.

**Melvin Benn:** It certainly is.



**Q58 Steve Brine:** Hello, Melvin. Thank you for joining us. I will pick up in a minute on what you said about 100% of your income. You said at the start you are tested and you are clear, you are unable to transmit the virus. What evidence do you have to say that with any level of certainty? We know that there is asymptomatic transmission. What about those people who even though they tested at the gate, let's say, with their wellies in one hand and their test kit in the other, are asymptomatic and passing it on? I would be concerned if testing is the rock around which you build your church because you know as well as we do that the safety advisory groups, the SAGs that are run by local authorities in each area, have to be sure now that festivals are safe and they meet numerous requirements. I know that that can be very bureaucratic, but I do not think that they will say that that is safe under the public safety tests that they have to assure themselves of. Isn't that a flaw in your argument?

**Melvin Benn:** No, I do not think so. To pick up on one point there, the safety advisory groups are not bureaucratic. They are mainly very proactive and constructive and have helped improve the safety at festivals, so certainly my view is that they are not bureaucratic. The testing detects people who are asymptomatic so they would show up on the test. The reality is that the data show that people who have been tested, even if they contract the virus immediately afterwards, cannot transmit the virus to others for a minimum of 72 to 96 hours, so that is very much part of that evidence. No, I disagree with you wholly on that and that is something that I would like to be engaging in with Public Health England around the table with the Department of Health and the DCMS.

**Q59 Steve Brine:** What level of confidence do you have in Public Health England and what they are telling you?

**Melvin Benn:** I have a large amount of confidence in Public Health England, if I am being honest with you, but it speaks from a totalitarian, singular voice of public health. Of course it would be very risk averse. That is the nature of what public health should be, not just what they are, but also what they should be. But I think we have to look at this in the round and look at the potential effects and begin to look at whether risk is appropriate. I believe that risk is appropriate and I believe that there will be people who say, "I do not want to come to the festival because I think the risk is too great" and there will be plenty of others—and you see those plenty of others every weekend in garden parties and streets and illegal raves up and down the country—who are desperate to take that risk in a more organised and structured way. That will only grow if we do not meet that demand.

I trust Public Health England. I have a lot of support for it. I think it has done a tremendous job, but I also have to look beyond that. We talk about 3,000 cases this week and 3,000 cases in April, for example, resulting in 35% of those people dying. From the end of July it is 9%. We have learnt to deal with things better and the more people we test the more people will test positive, but when we are testing them and they are



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testing positive and they are quarantining themselves, that will mean the virus has less opportunity to jump from person to person. That is what the testing will allow to happen. It will drive the R rate down.

**Q60 Steve Brine:** With respect, I think you are talking absolute sense about testing, test, test, test. I think you are talking sense that testing is important, but you are talking about a level of testing epidemiology that does not exist yet. I am not arguing against festivals. My goodness, there was a big gap in my weekend at the end of June, as I love to go. But festivals need a vaccine, don't they? That is the truth of it. You can say the Government have put all their eggs in a vaccine basket, as some of my colleagues have said this morning, but festivals need a vaccine.

**Melvin Benn:** It is the truth of it as you see it. It is not the truth of it as I see it. I see very clearly that festivals can go ahead safely with adequate testing.

**Q61 Steve Brine:** You represent Festival Republic, obviously. That is one of the reasons you are here, but you do not represent the entire industry, do you? We have talked about the mothership of the industry here, which is Glastonbury, and all of the impact that that has across the economy and the so-called Glastonbury bounce in the music industry and all of that. You said in answer to my colleague, Mr Brennan, that 100% of your revenue is about getting people into fields. The question that could be asked is are you taking an unnecessary risk with a testing regime that we would love to have but we do not in the pursuit of the mighty dollar?

**Melvin Benn:** No. People are very welcome to ask that question. The one thing that I am absolutely focused on is the safety of the festival attendees and I have been focused on that from day one. I referenced it even just a few minutes ago when we talked about the SAGs, that they are not bureaucratic, they are proactive and constructive and they make the festivals better for the festival goers. No, I am not chasing the dollar. I am chasing the replacement of a cultural vacuum that has been created by the pandemic and, no, it is not about the dollar. Yes, of course I am interested in business, but I am more interested in gathering them.

**Q62 Steve Brine:** Licensing fees being charged for festivals that have not gone ahead this year is an issue. Is there something that you think Government needs to do in that respect that we could maybe put into our recommendations?

**Melvin Benn:** Yes, 100%. One or two councils have been generous enough to waive the licence fee or reduce it to a relatively modest amount that reflects the fact that no work has gone on around the festivals. It has been a huge impact for Glastonbury, for example. It has been a huge impact on all of my festivals, but interestingly enough it has been a massive impact on the smaller festivals in particular. For the Government to say that they would either waive it or refund it or, if it is already paid for this year, and allow that to roll into next year would be a massive boost.



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**Chair:** Thank you for your evidence today, Melvin Benn, Managing Director of Festival Republic.

Q63 **Chair:** I am now going to call our third witness, who is Lucy Noble, Artistic and Commercial Director, Royal Albert Hall, and Chair, National Arenas Association. Good morning, Lucy.

**Lucy Noble:** Good morning.

Q64 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Why was it not possible to have any audience in the Royal Albert Hall for the Proms? Was that decision taken by the BBC or by the Royal Albert Hall? Lots of venues, music producers and artists have expressed concern that you were seen very much to have a precedent on this and you could have set a standard. Do you agree that it sent a very damaging signal to see the Royal Albert Hall empty during the Proms?

**Lucy Noble:** I disagree with that statement because I think it has given people hope to see live music in an iconic venue being performed again. I went into the hall last week and I was thrilled to see some activity back on the stage. The reason why we do not have audiences is because the announcement to say we could have a socially distanced audience with a performance took place on the day when we were allowed to have performances with socially distanced audiences. As Rebecca said earlier, you need months to remobilise. All of our stewards are on furlough. We have to train them. The cost of having audiences in is difficult. We have to have huge hygiene regimes and it was just too late. The news came too late and this is why we need to have the stage 5 announcement a lot earlier because it takes us many months to remobilise our businesses. We have 80% of our staff on furlough at the moment—that is some 400 staff—so it is not as simple as just saying, “You can have an audience next week”.

Q65 **Alex Davies-Jones:** You mentioned the stage 5 date being needed. Rebecca and Lord Lloyd-Webber also mentioned that. They stressed the point that they need a date, but we are seeing local lockdowns taking place again, we are seeing the virus spreading rapidly. The Health Secretary for England is due to give a statement today in the Commons on the prevalence of the virus again. It looks like a second wave is on the cards. What do you think of and what value would there be in realistically setting a date that we do not know could ever happen?

**Lucy Noble:** I personally think—and I think generally the industry thinks this—that any date would be better than nothing. There have been huge consequences of venues not being able to put on performances, serious financial consequences. I can speak for not only the Royal Albert Hall but the 23 arenas that I represent and we are also members of the British Association of Concert Halls, which represents another 40 of our mid-range venues. All venues are on their knees financially. The Royal Albert Hall has forgone £18 million worth of income since closure and we have exhausted £12 million of reserves and refunded £6.5 million worth of tickets. That is an indicative situation across all of the venues.



We would rather have a date because we do not know how to plan. We do not know if we should be making redundancies. Some people already have made redundancies, but they are hanging on to some skilled staff like riggers, lighting people, sound people, who you would need to get on board quickly to remobilise. To give an indication, to strategically and financially plan would be most beneficial and we would really like to have a date.

**Q66 Alex Davies-Jones:** The Royal Albert Hall breaks even at between 80% to 90% capacity—that is some of the evidence that we have already had from you—which is higher than the level we have heard from a lot of the other sectors and other industries. Why is this and to what extent is that model replicated across the sector?

**Lucy Noble:** I do not think it is unusual. We do 400 shows on our main stage normally at the Royal Albert Hall and most of our shows break even at about the rate that you mentioned. That is why the socially distanced model does not work for us. We are fortunate that Westminster have agreed that we can measure the 1 metre from nose to nose now. We were working on a capacity of about 35% but it has shifted to just over 50%, which is good, but still not high enough to make performances work. That is what the break even is. There is a handful of shows that would work at about 50% break even. Most are much higher and I think Rebecca and Lord Lloyd-Webber said the same thing about West End shows. We do a huge number of genres at the hall, from music through to opera, ballet and sport, and for largescale ballet productions the break evens are very high. There is a huge investment to put on those.

**Q67 Alex Davies-Jones:** I have been working a lot over the summer with the One Voice Campaign that is actively trying to get some sort of package stimulus for the arts sector as a whole, so when you can get a reopening date it would be a similar package to the Eat Out to Help Out scheme. I know the Government are looking at something similar. They are calling it Seat Out to Help Out, where there would be some sort of Government-backed scheme of you buy one ticket and they would help with the cost of another or help reduce the cost of tickets. What are your thoughts on this? Do you think this could help and this sort of Government scheme would help get bums back on seats when it would be safe to do so?

**Lucy Noble:** I think something like that would be fantastic. We need a cash injection somehow. If it is Seat Out to Help Out or whatever we call it, we would need a subsidy on the spare seats that we are not able to fill. It would be fantastic if we could look at something like that. I think some sort of insurance scheme, an underwriting scheme by the Government, would be very useful. I know that the Government have done that for TV. I think that is a big barrier at the moment, that people are worried to put on performances in case there is a second repeat because we cannot get insurance to cover cancelled shows. Even if it was an underwriting scheme to cover the cost of putting these on and there was a limit in aggregate, anything would be helpful and would stimulate people to put shows back on, which I think is needed at the moment.



**Q68 Giles Watling:** Thank you, Lucy, for coming along. The Albert Hall is a unique place and we heard from Lord Lloyd-Webber and Rebecca that they have fogging, self-sanitising door handles and all that. Are you doing any regimes like that to the hall so that you can reopen?

**Lucy Noble:** We have quite a lot in place at the moment, because we have the Proms in, which has been wonderful. We do not have an audience in, as we have spoken about already, but we have temperature checks, very high-level sanitation regimes. We have foggers, as Rebecca mentioned, but also we have to deal with the social distancing. The Proms come in with a very large team, large orchestras, choirs, and they bring a large workforce. What is interesting with social distancing is that they are having to use the front of house spaces to make more dressing rooms and so on.

Social distancing does not just impact on the audience and the finances, it impacts on the backstage area and how you can run a show productively. When you have largescale productions coming in, it means that you might not be able to open bars and restaurants, for example, that might have to be used for dressing rooms and of course that impacts on the show.

**Q69 Giles Watling:** Yes, absolutely. Can you tell me how the hall is usually funded? How are you funded normally? How do you do your funding?

**Lucy Noble:** We do not get any Government funding at all. We generate money from putting on shows, our ticket income, our seat holders contribute each year and we have philanthropic gifts from people as well, but we do not receive any Arts Council funding or any Government funding.

**Q70 Giles Watling:** So you stand on your own two feet. Are you able to access the £1.57 billion package that is going to the cultural sector? Do you have plans in place to access that?

**Lucy Noble:** That is a very good question because of course when Oliver Dowden announced the £1.57 billion rescue package, the Royal Albert Hall was hailed as one of the crown jewels that this package would save. Interestingly, we have been told that we are not eligible for any of the grant at all. We are only eligible to take a loan. We have already taken £10 million worth of loans. We would rather not get into any more debt, so that is disappointing. Some members of the National Arenas Association have applied for funds, but the deadline was only last Friday so we do not know if they have been successful yet. I do not think that it has ended up being what it was hailed to be and the Royal Albert Hall is getting no funding. The difficulty for us is that people saw that announcement and thought, "The Royal Albert Hall is okay now" so the philanthropic gifts have stopped coming in because they think we have been saved by the Government when in fact we haven't at all.

**Q71 Giles Watling:** You need to do a PR exercise on that. What criteria didn't you fulfil?



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**Lucy Noble:** We were told that our need was too big because we are applying for £20 million from that pot and the grants go up to £3 million, so we were told we could do one or the other. As I said, we have lost £18 million of income, so that was the reasoning behind it.

Q72 **Giles Watling:** Apart from a date, which we have already talked about, the big ask from you to Government would be to increase the amount that you could access through this scheme?

**Lucy Noble:** Yes. We would like to have a cash injection, but the other big thing, if we cannot have a date yet, we would love it if the furlough scheme could be extended. When that stops it is going to be absolutely detrimental to the industry. Like I said, we are just hanging on to staff at the moment, but without an extension I am pretty sure that there will be redundancies and layoffs across the board with all of our venues. As we do not know what is happening, we have to prepare for the worst case scenario at the moment with the absence of a date or any other information. A cash injection as well as a date would be great, a cash injection, whether it is an extension of the furlough or the Eat Out to Help Out kind of scheme.

Q73 **Giles Watling:** Can you tell me, so that we get a fuller picture, how many people you employ and how many people you have on furlough?

**Lucy Noble:** We employ about 500 people and we have about 400 of them on furlough at the moment.

**Giles Watling:** That is quite a serious picture. Thank you very much.

Q74 **John Nicolson:** Thank you, Lucy, for giving evidence. Some of the figures that you have given are quite stark, so I would like to remind people that you said that you have lost £18 million in revenue, that you have spent £12 million of your reserves and have refunded £6 million in tickets. How long can you go on like that?

**Lucy Noble:** We are hanging in there and, as I have said, we are taking loans, but we are getting to the crunch point. What we want to do is look after our staff, of course, as well as the building. We are getting to the crunch. We are trying to organise some socially distanced Christmas concerts, not to make money—I want to make that very clear, we cannot make money—but to have activity in the hall and to employ our staff so that we can help the staff and bring the hall to life a bit. But we have lost Cirque du Soleil in January and February. As you probably know, they have declared bankruptcy, so we are trying to fill those dates, but without knowing if we are going to be able to do shows at that point.

We could probably put on some shows and fill a lot of those dates, but without knowing it is an impossible situation for us and for all venues, I would say. Most venues have lost the entirety of their autumn season. All of the arenas now are writing off autumn, which is a real shame. I am talking about the arenas, but other venues in the country may still be



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looking to some Christmas dates, and that would be great if we could do that.

Q75 **John Nicolson:** Cirque du Soleil has gone bankrupt. At current spending levels, current income levels, when will the Royal Albert Hall go bankrupt?

**Lucy Noble:** It is a difficult question to answer because we have taken out loans. We are financially modelled to open next spring and we hope that that is worst case scenario. After that, we would have to make serious decisions.

Q76 **John Nicolson:** If you can't? I am trying to get a sense because I wonder if Ministers understand the level of urgency and the idea that an iconic venue like yours would not be able to continue to function, would close down. Who would have once thought that Cirque du Soleil would go bankrupt? It is such an astonishing thought because it is such an iconic company. I am trying to get Ministers to focus their minds on the dire states that your venue is in. If it carries on like this and spring is the worst case scenario, but you cannot make it to the spring, what would happen? When would you close?

**Lucy Noble:** I do not know the answer to that question, but we would be looking at a mothballing kind of scenario if it goes on for much longer after that. If we cannot open until next Christmas, we are in a serious situation. That is for all venues, not just the Royal Albert Hall.

Q77 **John Nicolson:** No, I understand that. You said you have 400 staff?

**Lucy Noble:** On furlough.

Q78 **John Nicolson:** Did you say that was 80% of your staff?

**Lucy Noble:** Roughly, yes.

Q79 **John Nicolson:** What happens if the Government do not continue the furlough scheme? One of my colleagues asked a question at Prime Minister's question time last week and asked Boris Johnson specifically what advice he would give to folk in his constituency who are on furlough at the moment and to businesses that have furloughed their staff if the furlough scheme was taken away. Boris Johnson's reply was this, I quote him exactly, "Get back to work". That was his response. Lots of places like yours know that that is a ludicrous bit of advice to give because they can't go back to work because they are not allowed to open. It was a silly, blustery thing for him to say. Can you explain to Boris Johnson and to people listening to this what will happen to your business if the furlough scheme is not extended in the way that the Chair of this Committee has requested that it should be?

**Lucy Noble:** As I said before, if it is not extended, the end of the furlough scheme at the end of October will be detrimental to the entire music industry, because it has been a positive support during this time. It



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has meant that we have kept staff on, although some venues have already made redundancies, which I am sure you know.

Q80 **John Nicolson:** Would you have to do that? Would you have to make people redundant?

**Lucy Noble:** I think we would have to look at redundancies and efficiencies.

Q81 **John Nicolson:** How many?

**Lucy Noble:** I do not know the exact number at the moment.

Q82 **John Nicolson:** We are all having to cope with Covid and we know from the news this week that we are heading towards the Brexit cliff edge as well, with the possibility of no deal, but even if there is a deal the Government are talking about visas for skilled workers that begin at £25,600 of income guaranteed. I am interested—and I do not think this question has been asked of any of the witnesses thus far—do you have workers from the European Union? I imagine you must have.

**Lucy Noble:** First, I will say I am not an expert in visas when I answer this question.

**John Nicolson:** No, I just want to know if you have staff from the European Union.

**Lucy Noble:** We do, and also with a lot of the touring shows that come in from across the world, most artists come with workers from abroad, so it happens all the time.

Q83 **John Nicolson:** Do you pay your European Union staff? Do you pay them £25,600?

**Lucy Noble:** We pay a whole range of salaries, depending on what role they do.

Q84 **John Nicolson:** Yes, but I am guessing you are not paying a lot of the bar staff, for example, £25,600. I wanted to try to touch on what effect that figure would have on your ability to recover post-Covid if you reopened and then you are hit with this visa whammy on top of everything else.

**Lucy Noble:** I can find that information for you and send it after this session, if that would be helpful.

Q85 **John Nicolson:** It would be great if you would do that. If you do not mind me saying so, you look utterly miserable answering these questions and you look despondent. We are talking a lot about actors and performers who are not offered anything under the furlough scheme and we are talking about theatres having to close, but I imagine it must be taking a huge toll on people like you who love your job, who love your industry, who love the iconic theatre that you work at, and you are trying to cope with the day-to-day stress of keeping an iconic venue like yours



open. It must be tough for you personally.

**Lucy Noble:** Yes, it is. The people who are left working at the hall are working day and night, literally, while also taking pay cuts. We have cut down ours to try to help support the hall. It is very difficult and people's work life is in the balance. It a difficult and emotional situation to deal with. On top of that, as the Chair of the National Arenas Association, we are supporting all those arenas that are in an equally difficult situation and trying to give them support and saying, "We are pushing for a date. We are really optimistic. We are working with DCMS. We are working for stage 5 guidance" and it is a very challenging time for leaders in this sector.

Q86 **John Nicolson:** I bet it is. An actor has written to me while this session has been on air and I want to read what he says to put it on the record. He says, "Not one West End actor or performer is on furlough. Tens of thousands of performers have been left with no money and no help. From a performer's point of view, Rome is now burnt and we are living in the cinders". I find that very upsetting to read.

**Lucy Noble:** It is very upsetting. I am a trained musician and many of my friends are musicians and they have no work and no income. That also goes for all the freelance workers, the people that are used for productions on a freelance basis. It is all of the people who work on a freelance basis in the arts sector and they are facing challenges. They are not having any income at all.

Q87 **John Nicolson:** I know the freelancers have just been hung out to dry. I do not know how they are coping daily, emotionally, financially or in any other way. Can I ask you the final question that I asked Lord Lloyd-Webber? If you can issue a single plea to the UK Government in closing, what would your plea be?

**Lucy Noble:** Allow us to open without social distancing. Work with us and Public Health England to bring some kind of process together so that we can operate full capacity events as soon as possible.

**John Nicolson:** Thank you.

Q88 **Damian Hinds:** Lucy, I think you said earlier that with a revised appraisal you could get to 50% capacity. I did not quite understand how the nose-to-nose basis works in a theatre. Clearly 50% utilisation is not sufficient to break even, but I wonder for a subset of productions if it is perhaps getting close to something that could break even with different approaches on pricing and yield management and maybe parallel screenings in cinemas. I do not know what else it is possible to do. What is your assessment of how close you get to a suitable atmosphere at 50%, even if on its own it is not enough to get you to the financial break-even point?

**Lucy Noble:** I think part of the issue we have is that even if people want to do shows, the artists do not necessarily want to do a show because they want to wait until they can have that atmosphere. The atmosphere



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is crucial. As you know, for our Christmas shows we have sing-along carols and it is very much a bringing together of people. We are going to give it a go at about 50% capacity. We have to think about how we create that atmosphere but I do not think it is ever going to be the same as having a full capacity performance.

**Q89 Chair:** Thank you, Lucy Noble, for your evidence today. It has been very interesting. I am now going to call on our last witness, who is Avi Lasarow, the CEO, Europe, Middle East and Africa for Prenetics. It is still morning. Good morning, Avi.

**Avi Lasarow:** Good morning, Chair.

**Q90 Chair:** Thank you for joining us today. You have dealt with the Premier League and the ECB as a company. Those are normally biosecure environments of a few hundred people. How do we get from that to tens of thousands of people within live events? Is it just, as has been suggested, mass testing or does it need to be a whole suite of measures? Can any of them be reliable and are we looking at real risk reward, as has been mentioned?

**Avi Lasarow:** We keep hearing the phrase “test, test, test”. As a company we believe, as do many others, that mass testing is going to be one of the contributing ways out of the situation that we are in while we are waiting for a vaccine. We hear the word “test” but we do not often hear the word “solution”. The reason I emphasise the word “solution” is because with the Premier League, ECB, boxing and other sporting events, as well as productions in other sectors we operate in, we are providing a solution that encompasses not just the tests, but of course a technology platform, a clinical health passport that is vital to making sure that access is granted to the right people under the right circumstances. We emphasise that a testing solution is needed. In the case of the sporting segment, yes, it has been a great success story to demonstrate how a pilot—for example, with the Premier League—could then be an access opener to the other sports to implement successfully the return of matches and play behind closed doors. But ultimately we think the same approach with pilots in every part of the sector to start scaling up piece by piece will help us eventually get to the return of spectators and individuals into theatres and such and a sense of normality.

**Q91 Chair:** Are you suggesting a sort of staged approach to go from a few hundred to maybe a couple of thousand to 10,000 to 20,000 and so on? What do you anticipate? What extra measures will have to be put in place apart from just testing in order to see each of those steps along the way?

**Avi Lasarow:** Most certainly there needs to be a phased approach. We have demonstrated a successful approach in the world of sport. We are doing it now across productions. The same should apply to theatres, to universities. Lord Lloyd-Webber speaks about a pilot that did not take into consideration the removal of social distancing. We believe that these are the sorts of pilots that should include what he intended to do in the



first place because what is happening is happening so fast—the disease and what we are learning—and every time we are able to perform something in a controlled environment in the way that Lord Lloyd-Webber intended gives us an opportunity, in the private sector specifically, to learn and share those experiences. We would love to share those experiences with Government. We think there is lots of learning to be taken from the work we, as well as other companies, are doing in moving this discussion forward to a safe return—in your case of spectators to stadiums and of course fans back into theatres—and to a sense of normality generally.

**Q92 Chair:** The events that you have supplied testing for have been socially distanced. To a certain extent they created bubbles, but within them there was a lot of social distancing. For the return of live music and other venues there may be no or very little social distancing and I cannot see how you go from one to the other. Wouldn't the costs of that sort of mass event be so high as to be almost prohibitive?

**Avi Lasarow:** Institutions to which we provided some input—for instance, the Tony Blair Institute, backed by Jeremy Hunt and William Hague—all endorsed the outlined approach to mass testing. Within that comes the ability to understand how you do that. Ultimately you do that by involving the Government's current strategy, by using Government's spare capacity to test individuals who are asymptomatic, building upon what they have already developed with point of care based testing—meaning tests done in “the patient environment”—so that testing is supplemented with point of care testing. Yes, that is not as accurate as the laboratory gold standard, but nevertheless it is better to test at the point of care than not at all. Then of course there is working with private companies like ourselves, which have great experience and can share that experience in the decentralisation approach. Government's current model is to centralise the laboratory process. We believe that there is a role for smaller laboratories and companies like ours to play our part in moving that strategy forward eventually to daily testing of the entire population.

**Q93 Clive Efford:** You have worked with the Premier League with some success in terms of getting it to return in June, but that is the fourth richest sporting league in the world. How realistic is it that you could involve other sports in what you have done in Project Restart?

**Avi Lasarow:** If we look at boxing here in the UK, for example, there are predominantly two main promoters—Queensberry Productions and Eddie Hearn from Matchroom—and one would argue, though I have not seen their finances, that they could afford a rigorous testing regime to get boxing matches back behind screens. In the same way as we have worked with them, we have also evolved some of the thinking to help the smaller promoters to safely host events. How do we do that? In the case of some of the bigger sports with deeper pockets there is a different protocol in place—testing twice a week or now going on to once a week—whereas with smaller grass roots events, there might be a self-collection



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tool where individuals can afford a test and do it through self-collection, which can be monitored remotely, and that would reduce costs.

We think that over time, as we are starting to see, the cost of testing will reduce significantly. With reduced cost, the cost of mass-scale testing will outweigh the cost and impact of the losses to the economy, such as those some of the previous witnesses outlined. We believe that there is a role for testing, including point of care testing with lower cost, but perhaps less sensitivity if you encompass that with commercially available health passports. We believe the health passports—importantly linked to track and trace—would help collaboratively to drive awareness and adoption of the Government’s track and trace system, to utilise it fully, and therefore start to see the signs of the return of fans to stadiums and elsewhere.

**Q94 Clive Efford:** So those who can afford it can get the Rolls-Royce service now, but leagues and sporting authorities with less income will have to wait for it to get cheaper. Is that where we are?

**Avi Lasarow:** That question comes down to who should be paying for the testing. Testing is currently being instructed by numerous companies across the UK. We are involved with the implementation of those testing solutions. In our view, what you will start to see is a blended approach where Government contributes to some of those ongoing testing requirements. As we understand from the latest Treasury figures, the cost of the furlough scheme was something like £35 billion. If we could get testing down to sub-£30, which is very realistic in a laboratory setting, the cost of testing the population fortnightly would be a fragment of the cost of the furlough scheme. This is about giving a hand up to this sector as opposed to a handout, because a hand up is much more sustainable over the long term.

**Q95 Clive Efford:** You have said that passports are the next step. How much of a barrier to that is the public sector’s mistrust of involving the private sector in handling data?

**Avi Lasarow:** We do believe that health passports, linked to track and trace—not just our health passport, other companies are developing these tools—can be delivered successfully. Data security is very important. We believe that companies delivering these sorts of solutions should have a minimum standard for handling data. We, as well as others, have ISO 27001. ISO 27001 is the global framework for data information security and it assures governments and other users of these health passports that the highest standards are put in place to protect data.

**Q96 Clive Efford:** Can I ask you about the capacity for testing? We have seen what has happened recently—people from my borough have been told they have to go to Dundee to get a test—and there clearly is a problem. What assessment have you made of the capacity in the system to carry out mass testing?



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**Avi Lasarow:** First, I am not sure if that problem is a system capacity issue or a logistic issue. One of the core components of a solution is a reliable logistic network to make sure you can get collection kits and samples to laboratories. I cannot comment on the specific problem you mention. We understand that the current daily capacity being used is approximately 150,000 tests out of the availability of 330,000 and that will increase. We believe that companies such as ours can very quickly, in a decentralised approach, help to increase that capacity.

Other technological and scientific considerations are emerging around the world, for example, the ability to do what is called sample pooling. Sample pooling means you can take, for example, a household of individuals, and test them all under the same single laboratory process and at a single laboratory cost. Ultimately if one of those individuals is positive, you could retest the positive samples. That means that you could increase the current capacity fivefold overnight, if the strategy around the scientific approach to sample pooling is deployed. I am not a scientist. I can only share with you what we see happening around the world.

Q97 **Clive Efford:** Take me through this. If I took a test and I was negative, I did not test positive for Covid, how safe am I from that test on? Is it not like a MOT? Could I not become infectious the following day? Could I be asymptomatic the next day and it is just that the virus had not broken out in me so it did not show up in the test? How long does the test result last? How long is it valid?

**Avi Lasarow:** Certainly it depends which test you are using because different tests have different specificities—false negatives and false positives—and it depends on the test. But this is an opportunity because if there was a list of commercial, clinical health passports that were integrated with track and trace, and there were a number of tests that were provided as part of the solution, that would mean we would be able to monitor regularly who was going to test in the required timeframe. For example, we currently test within a five-day window. You could test more frequently if that is what your protocol said you should do, but the five-day window is the approach that we believe we have been successfully taking to test the individuals, the actors and performers, let's say, of sports or casts of productions.

Q98 **Clive Efford:** You believe that the private sector can offer the capacity, but is the capacity there even in the private sector—with the multiplicity of companies coming in—realistically to carry out these tests and turn them around in the time you are talking about in order to get fans back into football grounds, let's say in October, which is the current target date?

**Avi Lasarow:** It will certainly be a staged approach. The October timeframe might be ambitious, from what we know and what we see, and I can only talk from that perspective. I think that if there is a consolidated effort from the private and public sectors, using the



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experience that exists within the sectors, there will be an opportunity to move towards that vision. I say “vision” in the context, for example, of the Health Secretary’s Moonshot vision. We do have to start with a vision, which Government have done, and work backwards. Part of getting to the vision is deploying pilots.

Most recently a citywide pilot has been announced in Salford. It will start testing individuals in the city to replicate a mass testing scenario. That will be one of the areas where, in my view, we would start looking at how we could integrate citywide mass testing into stadiums for football or other sports or even in theatres within that city. We are quite optimistic about what the future holds because we can see how the global technology landscape is changing. We can see prices reducing and most importantly, in our view, we can see a way forward, and that is piece by piece working on pilots, learning from those pilots and applying the learning to the sector.

**Q99 Clive Efford:** What do you say to those critics who say this belongs in the public health sector and should not be in the private sector at all?

**Avi Lasarow:** I believe there is a role for us all to play. To validate that view, when Covid-19 commenced in the UK, we of course reached out to the NHS and others to offer our support and make laboratory processes available. For reasons that I am not aware of, that offer was not necessarily welcome because, I assume, there was at that time a more centralised approach. We then learned from experiences of Covid-19 coming from our parent company and successfully deployed what we learned with the Premier League and now other sports. That shows there is clearly a role for the private sector to play in delivering solutions. We, as a company, would very much like to share those solutions with multiple working groups because they are so vital in consolidating an efficient approach for other companies to deploy similar solutions.

**Q100 Clive Efford:** Is the failure of the app for contact tracing and the catastrophic failures we have seen in the private sector in delivering testing and other things problems for you to overcome because public opinion has moved considerably against the involvement of the private sector?

**Avi Lasarow:** Our digital health app has been scanned approximately 60,000 times in the last 60 days or so. It has been a success, we believe. It has been a privilege to offer this solution across sectors, by the way, and we do think Government certainly can link their app to apps like ours in order to accelerate the delivery of track and trace.

**Q101 Damian Hinds:** Following on from what Clive Efford was asking, can I start by asking about reliability? We know that antibody tests have quite high rates of false negatives. There has been a debate about whether airport testing gives people a false sense of security. What exactly does your testing test, with what time latency and what proportion of tests are inconclusive?



**Avi Lasarow:** I cannot comment on what is the right approach to airport testing. We do know that globally 30 airports are deploying the gold standard, which is PCR testing. Our test uses the laboratory-based PCR test. It looks for the active virus. It looks at it from a combined sensitivity of 98.8%, which is 100% specificity and 98% sensitivity. The tests are highly accurate. They are the gold standard and have been deployed successfully here as well as in the rest of the world.

Q102 **Damian Hinds:** People could have a false sense of security from a test received at an airport testing centre.

**Avi Lasarow:** Again, I cannot talk specifically about airport testing, but we believe, as we have demonstrated across multiple sports, productions and companies using our services that testing has a key role to play. It gives confidence and if it is done correctly, within the context of a solution, can be done well. We refer to some of the standards that we have been privileged to be involved in across sporting segments and otherwise where it has been done well. Let's learn from that. Let companies like ours participate and share this knowledge with working groups because we think that will be vital in translating our experience over the last months into the Department's bigger vision and Moonshot objectives.

Q103 **Damian Hinds:** If you have come into contact with the virus and you will at some point be symptomatic, does that show up immediately in your test or is there some latency?

**Avi Lasarow:** As Melvin Benn mentioned, there are different scientific details, but allegedly the viral load is quite low within the first 72 hours and therefore it might not necessarily show up immediately.

Q104 **Damian Hinds:** Isn't that the false sense of security that people are worried about, that, for example, travellers in airports might fall into? I ask about airports because it has been a current debate, but exactly the same principle in argument would apply to sports venues, music venues and so on.

**Avi Lasarow:** Different countries have different perspectives about airports. The science is emerging. We believe that we have to keep an eye on the scientific developments to make sure that airport testing solutions meet whatever government standards. From our perspective, airport testing might be able to reduce the quarantine period. Whether it eradicates the need for a quarantine process is not for us to decide. What we, as a company, can decide is to share our experience, test where we can, to help get Britain back to work and back to play.

Q105 **Damian Hinds:** Your company has been involved on a relatively small scale—in very important work with sports teams—but what we are talking about this morning, taking testing approaches potentially to mass audiences to enable venues to operate at capacity, is orders of magnitude greater than the operations that you working on. You have touched on these things already: capacity is important, unit cost is important and



turnaround times are important. Can you tell us what you think of the trend in those three areas? In particular, how low do you think the unit cost can become and how quick turnaround times can become for mass testing?

**Avi Lasarow:** As for us, as with other companies in the private sector, being small, between us and our office in Hong Kong we have processed 150,000 private Covid-19 tests in the last 30 days. As for how this works for sectors, in our Hong Kong office we most recently tested 16,000 restaurants and 250,000 employees of those restaurants under Project Screen by Circle. That resulted in a sticker outside each restaurant saying, "This restaurant has been Covid-19 tested" which of course helps all parties concerned to suppress any of the positives by putting them into isolation, but also gives individuals confidence about getting back in.

To answer your question on unit economics, the cost of testing is not just for the laboratory process. There are variable costs for the individuals who collect the samples and the cost of the PPE to ensure those people remain safe. You might need to erect pods, facilities, to conduct the collections. We believe that it will only be a matter of months before we see the cost of laboratory testing itself at under £40 or so for the gold standard tests. President Trump recently purchased 150 million test kits from Abbott for \$5 per kit.

Going into the thinking around how a mass testing regime could be implemented, it is a pillared approach. It has evolved from the excellent Government strategy that has been implemented to date. It has used the capacity that has not been tested and it has overlaid the point of care testing that has been authorised for use and plugged into a fantastic digital health passport solution. That is the way that we could all come together in a decentralised model, with private companies contributing to facilitate moving from where we are today to an environment that we will all feel is safer through mass testing.

Q106 **Damian Hinds:** Finally, I want to ask about governance, which you just touched on. In a health passport future—you mention the ISO 27001 standard that you are signed up to—do you think that our country, or indeed any country, is ready for the sort of data sensitivity and data protection challenges presented by a scenario where the public sector and the private sector and multiple companies have access to people's health data, some of which would be commercially valuable?

**Avi Lasarow:** We have seen that the Covid-19 situation has forced companies, governments, pharmaceutical researchers and so on to accelerate and advance the way they think to get to market with solutions. This may be a question about whether we are ready to integrate health data across private companies and governments. We have to think about it in the context of the new normal. Lord Lloyd-Webber did not want to use that cliché and neither do I, but in the context of the new normal we do have to think not just about Covid-19 and what we have to do as a country to get solutions in place, but we



also have to be in a state of readiness for when Covid-20, Covid-21 and Covid-22 may or may not arrive and we are in a situation technologically and otherwise in a state of readiness to deliver solutions to maintain a sense of normality. We have to be forward thinking. We have to have moonshots. To be able to achieve the success of what needs to be done in the coming months, those moonshots and the thinking behind them have to start stage by stage basis, which is what we are all contributing to, whether in the private sector or Government directed.

Q107 **Kevin Brennan:** You mentioned Project Moonshot, the phrase that was used by the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, but he did not give a timeframe for it. At least President Kennedy said that he could achieve the moonshot by the end of the decade. From your experience, when do you think that realistically we could reach a situation where the whole population could be regularly checked and tested?

**Avi Lasarow:** It would be difficult for me to give you a date, difficult for me to be able to even think about the details of who needs to do what by when to get to the date because there are so many parts of it outside my control. However, I can say that we should be thinking about a moonshot by early next year. I think that would be realistic. I think it is possible, but it is only going to be possible when we bring in private laboratories and companies to share their experience and contribute to the numbers, when the scientific landscape is evaluated in areas such as sample pooling and you can pool samples to reach capacity more quickly and when point of care testing is authorised for use, together with the use of a health passport integrated into the track and trace system. There are so many variables, but perhaps the recommendation, as Melvin Benn said, is for companies such as ours and sectors that are having these problems to come together and work with Government—whether it be with the new track and trace Department or the Department of Health—and place possible solutions on the table, to discuss them and to move them forward. They have to start.

Q108 **Kevin Brennan:** You have hinted that this is not just something for now—I prefer to call it the new abnormal—that for now this is important, but if a successful vaccine was discovered, are you suggesting that there should be a permanent health passport infrastructure with this kind of data-sharing on a national level so that we have a greater state of preparedness for possible future pandemics?

**Avi Lasarow:** Absolutely. I think we should be in a state of preparedness for future pandemics. I think that companies, governments and individuals need to take as many learnings as they can from the last six months and think about how we could apply them moving forward into a state of readiness. We don't know what we don't know. What we do know is very important to share across working groups, with all stakeholders, so that we can collectively come forward with a way forward.

Q109 **Kevin Brennan:** Do you anticipate that that might mean in future—and this obviously has huge data implications, which is another part of this



Committee's work—that even in normal times, whether new or old normal times, people attending a mass event would still be required to have some kind of app, some kind of data-driven passport that would give them some sort of health clearance that they were fit to attend an event? Or would it be something that would be switched on and off at times of crisis?

**Avi Lasarow:** My personal view is that it would probably become the new norm. I can remember, in the not too distant past, having my credit card, my banking card and my mobile phone to access the London Underground was a concept that I needed to become familiar with, only to now know that is the normal of what you do when you access the transport system. In the same way, health passports linked to health results might seem slightly odd or one might wonder what their longevity might be, but what I believe commercially is that that would become the new norm. We have seen it across the sector. There are companies like Babylon Health that offer a triage service, working alongside the NHS. With Covid-19 upon us, companies like Babylon have been able to accelerate the usefulness they can provide to us all. I think health passports, testing solutions and technology will be part of what is going to become very useful, moving us all forward.

**Q110 Kevin Brennan:** There are significant civil liberties implications to all of this, aren't there? One final question from me. Have you been involved at all—I know you have South African connections—with the Pro14 rugby union league, which includes clubs from Wales, Scotland, Ireland and South Africa? If so, what is your involvement and can you give us any update on what is happening with that league?

**Avi Lasarow:** I cannot talk specifically about any of our customers, but we have been involved in testing across multiple sports, though not in this league, I might add. We have a lot of learnings and we understand—though I cannot give specifics—that certain sports may not have had the successes that we have seen in some of the work that we have been doing. This is an opportunity, I believe, for the Government and DCMS to maybe consolidate the learnings from multiple providers so that any mistakes, if they are made, are not repeated, to make sure that moving forward only the best practices and framework are adopted to assure that sportspeople and theatre performers can get back to work.

**Q111 Giles Watling:** I have only one very short question because most of what I was going to ask has been asked. On this health passport, which you have been proposing as a great thing, we have a little diagram here of the four stages in our paperwork. Stage 2 is, "Get an antigen or antibody test to establish whether you have had coronavirus and are immune". That is what it says. It seems to be a terrific idea, but it does seem to fall at that second part because as far as I am aware—unless you can enlighten me—having the antigen or having had coronavirus is no guarantee that you are immune. Is that the case?



**Avi Lasarow:** I cannot speak as a scientist, but we understand that there is no guarantee that you cannot get coronavirus again. However, the current research, as I understand it, demonstrates that having the antigen means that you cannot currently get the virus again, but we are learning all the time. This is why one keeps referring back to the need to share the experience of what we learn. In this case you talk about the science. In the case I have been speaking about, it is about the practical experience on the ground with multiple productions, multiple global studios, multiple sporting events and taking those learnings and applying them to whatever solution is deemed to be safe and successful by our esteemed scientists and governments.

Q112 **Giles Watling:** Yes, I get that. I do just wonder if that is the case. As you say, we do not know whether or not having the antigen it makes you immune or not. How far away are we from this health passport that everybody is looking to get? Is this just a pie in the sky dream or is it an imminent practicality?

**Avi Lasarow:** As a company, we have deployed a health passport with added value just to help move things along, such as access to venues and other controls. We use it to almost alert if more than a defined number of people are in a space where they should not be. It has a number of functions. It is not just us, there is a project called the Commons Project running in aviation right now backed by the World Economic Forum, CDC out of the US, the Rockefeller Center and many others, who are looking to trial a common health passport across the aviation sector, so it is not just us who are saying this is a way forward. There are obviously many global organisations seeing this as a way forward and we have an opportunity here to demonstrate our successes and become a leader in health passporting and how it can work. We have demonstrated that across 60,000 scans in the last small period. If that is amplified across our country, we can lead the technology behind how we can do this successfully.

**Giles Watling:** Yes, but the jury is still out, fundamentally. Thank you very much.

**Chair:** Thank you, Avi Lasarow, for your evidence today. That concludes our session.