

Written evidence submitted by Festival Medical Services

Response to DCMS Committee call for evidence from Festival Medical Services

Introduction

Festival Medical Services (FMS) has over forty years' experience of providing specialist medical cover to festivals and other large outdoor events. It is a charity and makes grants from its surplus income to support healthcare projects in the developing world. In 2020 it was a recipient of the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

FMS has been sole medical provider at Glastonbury Festival since 1979 and Reading Festival since 1995 and normally supports a range of other events throughout the season.

Responses

What is the economic and cultural contribution of the UK's festival industry?

Economic:

The events sector is worth many billions of pounds per annum to the UK economy, but in 2020 its contribution is expected to plummet to a fraction of the usual amount. Successful event production companies provide direct and indirect employment for large numbers of people. Many organisations and individuals, including FMS, rely on UK festivals for most or all of their income and are struggling to survive.

Many events support charities, through direct donation, fund-raising and contracting with charitable organisations to provide staff and services. Glastonbury, for example, raises hundreds of thousands of pounds each year for charities like Water Aid and Oxfam.

Cultural:

There are festivals in the UK devoted to every branch of the creative arts – music, dance, theatre and literature. Music festivals make live performances by the world's foremost artists uniquely accessible to their

fans and provide a stage for new and emerging talents to be heard. They are thus enablers for the music industry which is a vital part of popular culture and itself worth billions of pounds to the UK economy.

Festivals increasingly focus on raising awareness of green issues and the practicalities of sustainable living.

For many young people, attending festivals has become an important rite of passage. They provide opportunities for novel social interaction and experiment and may be a first experience of being away from home and fending for themselves in a largely sympathetic and supportive environment.

What has been the impact of cancellations on local economies and those who derive income from festivals during 2020?

Festivals benefit local economies through the purchase of goods and services from suppliers in the area. Retailers benefit from spending by the large numbers of people attracted to the area by the event; these include festival attendees and, over a longer period, significant numbers of event staff and contractors.

The cancellation of almost all events in 2020 has had a huge effect. Businesses in the proximity of large events, especially in rural areas, may derive a significant proportion of their annual income from them and this has been totally lost.

Individuals and organisations supporting the festival industry have had no work and no income. It is likely that many businesses will not survive and their absence will impact on the ability of events to restart. Some events themselves may never come back.

FMS has had to go into “survival mode”. Thanks to the Government Job Retention Scheme, there have so far been no redundancies but staff have received only a percentage of their normal wages. Through sale of assets and strict economies, the charity has so far been able to stay afloat but this may not remain the case if the pandemic goes on for much longer. At a time of greatest need, it has not been possible to make grants to any of the projects that would normally be supported.

Nobody knows how long the effects of the pandemic will be felt or whether current inactivity will be temporary or permanent for individuals and organisations; the stress this uncertainty causes should not be underestimated.

What are the risks to festivals taking place in 2021 and beyond, and how can these be mitigated?

There is a limit to how long businesses set up to run and service festivals can survive a protracted period of inactivity and it is likely that some will go to the wall. The cost of staging events will inevitably rise as extra measures are implemented to keep safe those on site and contractors have to increase crew numbers to allow for the late withdrawal of staff testing positive.

Social distancing at festivals is not really possible and while the risk of spreading infection remains high, it is difficult to see them resuming in their current form. It remains to be seen whether measures needed to increase public safety might irrevocably change the ethos of festivals and render them unattractive to prospective customers. It is also unclear whether the festival-going public will feel sufficiently confident to attend.

These risks would best be mitigated by a significant reduction in the prevalence of Covid or a substantial level of immunity in the population.

Alternatively, it might be possible for events to be redesigned in such a way as to reduce the risks of on-site transmission but this could alter them to such an extent as to make them unviable.

What measures are needed for audiences to attend festivals without social distancing, and how realistic are they?

Risk can rarely be eliminated and the aim should be to reduce it to an acceptable level. Several suggestions have been made:

- “Covid passport” – admission on production of evidence of a recent negative test. This would not eliminate the risk of introducing infection to the site, since a person could become infected and contagious between having the test and coming to the event.
- Rapid-result testing on entry – the logistical problems would be massive, involving a mass testing operation at the gate with some means of keeping people distanced while they waited for their result and managing the practical difficulties of turning away one of a group of friends attending the event together.
- Certification of vaccination (when available) – there are civil liberties considerations to making vaccination mandatory for admission.
- Daily screening and comprehensive medical support for site crews, whose numbers may run into thousands and are on site for several months before and after the event.

It may be that events will only be able to resume when the prevalence of infection in the general population has been reduced to a sufficient degree.

What has been the impact of the temporary VAT cut and Culture Recovery Fund on festivals and their supply chains, and what else can the Government do to secure their futures?

So far as FMS is concerned, the Job Retention Scheme has been vital and its continued survival depends to a great extent on it continuing. The charity has also benefitted from the Local Authority Discretionary Grant.

FMS is not VAT registered because most of its services are either Exempt or Outside the Scope. It would probably have been eligible for a grant from the Culture Recovery Fund, had this option been better publicised.

How has the structure of the UK festivals market evolved over recent years, and what has this meant for consumers, artists and the wider industry? What further changes might be anticipated?

In recent years there has been an ever-increasing emphasis on public safety at events, evidenced by:

- Commissioning of more comprehensive medical and welfare services
- Safeguarding measures
- Messaging raising alcohol and drug awareness amongst attendees
- Improved crowd management
- Increased emphasis on sustainability – recycling and waste management, water conservation etc

How can festivals be supported to reduce their environmental impact and tackle the dangers of illegal drug use?

Environmental impact:

Events benefit from a close and supportive relationship with licensing authorities and agencies such as Public Health England and the Environment Agency, which are able to offer practical advice and help. A multiagency Safety Advisory Group is an effective forum for promoting liaison between parties.

Ultimate success is largely dependent on public involvement and cooperation, which can be encouraged through pre-event publicity on websites and social media and suitable messaging on site.

The dangers of Illegal drugs:

It is necessary to have realistic expectations of what is achievable at an event; drug and alcohol misuse are issues that affect society as a whole and these cannot be solved on a festival site. They can however be mitigated:

- Quality on site medical services providing an appropriate level of cover in line with the specific assessed risk profile of each event
- Specialist facilities where assessed as being needed – rapid response teams with advanced resuscitation skills, A&E staff and resources, mental health services including on site psychiatry
- Close liaison between on site medical teams, ambulance services and local emergency and mental health referral centres
- Experienced and well-resourced welfare and safeguarding teams on site
- Clear and well-publicised event policy for dealing with drug- and alcohol-related issues
- Health promotion initiatives
- Effective measures to reduce excessive alcohol consumption through restriction of under-age sales at on-site bars and controlling the amount of alcohol brought in
- Consideration of on-site drug testing. Back of house testing of seized substances can provide useful intelligence, but FMS believes that the benefit of front of house testing of samples submitted by festival-goers is not established and there is real potential for unintended consequences which does not appear to have been adequately assessed