

Written evidence submitted by Premier Rides Ltd

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By Phillip Lucas Director Premier Rides Ltd June 19 2020

Premier Rides is one of the Companies that is rare that doesn't come under a standard umbrella, it is part of the Travelling Showman (Funfair) industry but rather than travel from one town to another, or one carnival to another, staying a few days at each opening up the rides to the general public, Premier Rides only attend private parties, like summer balls, weddings, Company Parties etc formally known as Corporate Events. We would liaise with a client and discuss what they require and agree a set fee for specific rides and they pay the hire fee + VAT and then either the day before or on the day we would take that equipment and build it at their venue and operate it on the day, the guests would use the rides as many times as they like free of charge. Unlike a traditional funfair that would be in a town this weekend and open Thursday to Sunday and then move 25 miles down the road to the next town, and every person that wants to ride on any of the rides pays a fee and has a ride.

In January/February 2020 our bookings were looking good with around 25/30 events confirmed for this season and a further 20 enquiries that would have turned into bookings, each year we provide equipment to 80 – 100 Corporate Events. In the 25 year history of Premier Rides we have done some events yearly and even though we have faced many challenges that have had an impact on the Corporate Events Market we have still sailed slowly through, two Gulf wars, a Foot & Mouth outbreak and a recession were testing times but we navigated our way through. As I was getting ready for my first event in March 2010 to attend a large sporting event, with equipment all tested ready to go we were all locked down and every single event booked for 2020 was cancelled over the following few weeks.

Equipment testing and insurances.

Where we do stand shoulder to shoulder with other showmen is the pre checks, like the traveling fraternity all our rides are inspected and insured, we have an insurance policy on each ride to cover us in case a member of the public is injured, and prior to leaving the yard all our equipment is tested and we have our inspection carried out early in March each year and this involves a 3 stage process.

- 1, Visual inspection where the examiner will see the ride working and inspect all parts of the ride and make recommendations as required.
- 2, NDT (Non Destructural test) this is a magnetic testing of all welded joints to check for cracks or weakness in the metal parts of the rides
- 3, Electrical test where wires and fuses boxes are visually checked for damage and RCD are checked for effectiveness and tested.

When the examiner is satisfied the ride is up to standard a document will be issued called ADIPS (Amusement Device Inspection Procedure Scheme) The ADIPS is an industry wide scheme and is recommended by the HSE. Needless to say this is an expensive inspection when you multiply it by many items.

Then of course we have our vehicles to tax and insure to get us from A to B like all industries have.

Who owns a fairground

Unlike the USA fun fairs are run differently here in the UK, an operator in the USA will own a complete set up all big rides, childrens rides, game stalls, and catering. In the UK we have one person who will organise a fair, he is called a "lessee" and will usually own a ride or two of his own and he will have a couple of sons who also owns a couple of rides, and then other relatives who travel with them, there will also be other showmen who own a ride who ask the Lessee if they could bring their ride to that event and would pay a fee to do so. The outskirts of the fair is made up with game stalls and rides for the children and these are usually owned by one of the bigger ride owners and operated by one of the wives or daughters and on bigger fairs they will have staff that operate them on a casual basis.

Winter Quarters and Parking

Some showmen are lucky enough to own their own yard, they will store their equipment at that yard and will live in a chalet on site, others will pay rent to store their equipment at that yard or like Premier Rides rent a separate yard. The yard we rent is in the grounds of a garden centre where a few cottage businesses operate. As a director of Premier Rides, I live in a house near the yard and do not have a need to stay overnight and events, so a caravan is not needed. The rent on my yard must be paid quarterly in advance and continues to be paid. Some showmen are receiving an income through rents and that whilst will pay for contributions it won't cover the bills.

Finance on Rides

With new fairground rides costing hundreds of thousands of pounds there are many showmen out there with high finance on new equipment but with no money coming in they are struggling. The demand for rides at the moment is low so no one would buy one even if you decided to sell it, whilst if you contact the finance company you might be able to hold payments but it still needs to be paid. Premier Rides does not have any finance on rides as all equipment belongs to the company.

How does Premier Rides or the fairground industry differ from other companies?

The fairground season starts each year around April and ends late September, some showmen are lucky enough to have a few venues on hard standing that they can attend briefly in October and some firework events with hard standing are able to accommodate rides. Occasionally we are hired to attend a firework event but nothing regular.

At the moment some businesses are crying out to open, pubs, restaurants, hairdressers, campsites are all making final preparations to open in July, and once the doors open they will be flooded with customers, look at the queues in the high street this week when more shops opened, hairdressers can extend their opening hours to fit more customers in to catch up, as can most businesses, campsites that are usually half full will have a busy time and already saying they are full in July, whilst some of these businesses might not make as much as they usually do, they would still be in profit this year, a lot of these have already benefited from the rate scheme and rate holiday all year. A local tree surgeon to me had a few weeks off and then went back to work and has caught up with work he lost during lockdown.

At the time of writing this there are no plans for fairgrounds to be allowed to open, there are some theme parks due to open in July and they have taken lengths to ensure they are Covid-19 ready. Due to how they are set up they can make rules and guidelines to ensure the public can enter, be safe and operate in a safe manner. Unlike the average fairground they can control the numbers coming in and are able to have sanitising stations readily available, they have said that they will restrict the number of visitors going on each ride, and will wash every rides every 30 minutes. These are all things that would be difficult to do on a public fairground, as they are open on all sides so you have no control on numbers, if they had to have fencing all the way round, who puts this up as each ride is operated independently, and whilst then you could stop people coming in, you cant control who is on the outside of the fence. As Premier Rides only attend Corporate Events there are non planned for 2020 making it a zero year for us. In June to August 2019 our VAT return paid just under £30,000 into the treasury, the same quarter this year will show a £0 VAT return. The Fairground Industry has a limit on when it can generate money and as explained we only open May to September and this cant be extended as the weather has turned by then and the nights draw in, so as parks and fields become wet and boggy the last thing Councils want is big lorries getting stuck in them as they get ready for the Winter. Already this year with the cancellation of all music festivals and carnivals even if the Government said we could open in July the big events have already been cancelled.

Furlough and Rate rebate Scheme

The Government has done well to assist the working man, some of the schemes have been very generous and helped families. We run Premier Rides in an efficient way, we attend an event in April and we might have some sub contractors at the event these are paid on the day, and over the weeks as we attend more events we continue to pay our sub contractors daily whilst invoicing our clients who sometimes don't pay us until 60 days after the event, as the season comes to a close we are still getting invoices paid but as our bills are all paid as a Director we are able to take money out of the business. However, we must ensure that there is money in the account to pay for the following season, vehicles to be put back on the road and the rides need to be tested and insured.

We rent a yard amongst a selection of yards and do not pay rates, we have no amenities or buildings as our office work is all done from an office at the home address, therefore did not qualify for the Business Grant Relief Scheme, but a few showman have benefitted from this.

Loans from our bank and the bounce back loan are both on offer but a loan now would just add pressure to our expenses and even if we did the bounce back it means as from May next year we are repaying a loan when we are at our worst time as work will have only just started. Our phones should start to get busy around February 2021 as we start to get enquiries from Companies that have plans to hold a party, or someone turning 50 and wants some entertainment at their party, however as the whole country is not doing very well now, and many Companies struggling the chances are we will not have many bookings next year and where as we should be able to pay all our bills including repayment of loans if we do not get these bookings we will have another bad year and more debt until the economy picks up with some predicting it could take a couple of years. We are aware some companies have done well out of the pandemic, so hopefully these will have a party and we will get some business, enough to carry us through to spring 2022 when I am fairly sure if we can survive we should start to pick up.

The Future in the industry

I am aware that a lot of showmen are taking other forms of employment, this is fine if they don't have any of the expenses set out above, the younger showmen are able to find employment but are competing against a lot of people for jobs. I am aware of a few showmen who have packed their equipment away or sold it off cheap and have got out of the business, some older ones have really struggled and without an income it has been a struggle for most showmen and no one has offered them support.

The issue is that showmen have to earn a higher wage in the summer as come the end of the season in the Autumn any money gained has to last through until the following spring, but at the start of the year before you take a ride out of the yard you have a lot of expenses and without any form of wage in 2020 its going to be impossible to survive the long winter.

Fairgrounds have been around dating back to the 18th Century and normally in June over 200 fairs would be taking place this weekend and we would have rides at around 20 Corporate Events throughout the UK, most children have fond memories of going on a ride at their local school fete or when the fun fair rolls into town, with a loss of operators there will be a lot of places that would no longer see a fair. Its not a massive business for thousands of people, it's a family business and a way of life for showmen and their families as they travel from town to town and a reduction in numbers of showmen would mean some communities never see a fairground. Fairground life is a hard life there are not as many people coming into it like their fathers did but are turning to other sections of the industry like catering, and a situation like this could cause a large percentage of ride owners to call it a day.

Most of the staff that work on the rides are laid off through the winter months but are given an end of year bonus to last through the winter and are allowed to stay in the yard of the showmen they work for, I'm told that most of these now have left due to lack of work and money and found other employment, so a new start with new training will be needed, which is not an easy thing to do bearing in mind the new season you need experienced staff to help the new staff.

My concerns are that a lot of ride owners will be starting the new season of 2021 with no money, in debt and will have to get on the road to begin generating an income in an industry where corners should not be cut, there is also staff that will need to be taken on and paid, I am also concerned on the amount of old rides that have come up for sale on auction sites, where it looks like showmen to raise some capital have scrapped old unused rides some of these rides should not be opened and in the wrong hands could be dangerous these rides being sold as scrap and are popping up for resale on auction sites.

I feel sorry for the elderly members of the industry some don't own these big rides or a yard, just a small game stall or something and its been a way of life for them all their life, they don't earn a fortune and go with their sons to fairs and the small amount they do earn is taxed and they don't invest into pension funds and some of them just get by and are in their 90's still working long days, yes it is through choice and will do so until the day they die, due to the nature of the industry and being brought up on the road they did not all attend schools so their reading and writing is not up to standard of some today and have not asked for any handouts all through their working life and not taken any benefits they have just worked from a young age many as young as 10 helping their dad out working a game stall on the local fair. These will struggle quietly through the winter and wont ask for help and wont eat as they should.

Why are showmen different to the average man on the street

There are several differences really but working on rides is not a career, it's a way of life, not something you are taught to do its something you have learnt to do growing up, going from town to town education was on a fairground and sometime time at school but rare. Today's generation is slightly different to the last one and its good to see some of these have gone to University and graduated but it is rare. The majority of showmen live either in a chalet or a caravan at a yard and this presents a problem when trying to secure finance, most showmen go to a specialist finance company to get finance on a new ride paying a higher rate of interest due to the risk as the collateral is the ride not in bricks and mortar.

The majority of Showmen belong to two main organisations The Showmans Guild and The Association of Independent Showmen. To be a showman is something you do because your father and grandfather were in the business, if Joe public decides to buy a fairground ride, they would need a storage yard with easy access and be able to get a ride about the UK, they would then have to find a venue for it and as most of the events have had the same family or the councils have dealt with the same family for generations it would be very difficult to just come into the business and take a location, plus just having one ride would not be a funfair so the person buying a ride would have to find a ride that is not already attending that particular fair as you don't have 2 sets of dodgems or 2 big wheels on a normal fair at the same time.

To be a showman you also must be prepared to work hard and be prepared to put in long days, and it is manual work. When you attend a corporate event you can arrive 5 hours before the event starts and build up the ride, the staff can rest whilst the ride owner would normally operate the ride during the event with some staff, then pack it away and drive to

the next location and build it back up again. It is not uncommon in the busy time to do this 3 or 4 days in a row and it's all manual work involving heavy lifting.

What can the Government do to help

This is a simple question, presuming that season 2020 is lost and whilst it could be possible to extend safety certificates, it is important rides are all inspected freshly after being closed for a season and it will be a task to arrange this with the demand on testers in the spring. There will also be repairs or maintenance needed. It's a question of keeping showman going through this tough time and the winter is the issue and whilst the yard owners have had the benefit of the rate rebate any funds would be to help the smaller showmen first.

The lack of assistance for the fairground industry has been bad, it does seem to be those who shout the loudest get heard and showmen have just kept quiet, Some of the support given has helped some but not all, and those who have not received any support and its more of a question of balance to help those missed out who still have bills to pay to keep their business going not so much those who have received payment of 80% who have been able to eat this month, but whereas the country should soon get back to a bit more normality showmen as explained above, will find it too late to start this year. I'm sure someone will say we should be ready so do we spend £4,000 now to have our rides tested and insured in case we can open, money that is needed to pay the rent to be used on something that may not happen if we are not allowed to open. It would be good if a face to face meeting can be called between the governing bodies of the fairground industry SG and AIS and a member from the DCMS to discuss this and hear what needs to be said and see where help is needed, this industry does need help and it would be good if this can be arranged soon, before its too late.

Looking back

I'm sure when this is all over a lot will be learnt and I'm not sure what can be done to help all industries and I agree we cant save everyone but there are certain traditions that need to be kept alive. Rather than just send out cheques to everyone in an industry look at those businesses to see if they need help, I know many successful companies that have received money that they could have survived without. Likewise, its ok to have the job furlough scheme and say it will stop in October what about those people who have no chance to work as the summer has been lost and now have no income for the winter, its not a question of people not being able to live there are benefits they can claim its keeping business alive that is the priority. Once the country is back to normal and or a vaccine is found and Corporate Events can continue it should not take long for the industry to get back to normal whilst it is expected to be a bit quiet for a year or so

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