

Policy Brief

Outside the Box: Open-Air Performance as a Pandemic Response

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KEY INFO

Research question: A multi-method approach examining the potential for innovative performances to take place in lower risk, environmentally sensitive open-air settings.

Policy area or themes:

- Places and Communities
- Creative Industries

Methods: Qualitative interviews with events officers and artists (30), practice-as-research (6 artist commissions in Exeter, summer 2021), online surveys (111).

Geographical area: UK-wide.

Research stage: Complete.

Summary of the research

Events have played a significant role in the way that the Coronavirus pandemic has been experienced and known in the United Kingdom. Significant early impacts were recorded on the arts and culture sector more generally and on live events and performances and those working to produce them.

Interdisciplinary in nature spanning theatre and management studies, this project used a practice-based approach (involving the commissioning of environmentally attuned outdoor performance events in the city of Exeter), alongside interviews and surveys with both artists and local authority events officers respectively. The intention was to investigate the potential for, and role of, live outdoor performance events in pandemic recovery, with special reference to the possibility of 'building back better', more sustainably. The empirical and practice-based research coincided with Step 3 and Step 4 of the roadmap to removing lockdown restrictions in England.

Policy recommendations

From our research with theatre and performance artists:

- The research corroborates existing evidence of the impacts of the pandemic on events workers. Despite complaints of a late and insufficient response from government support structures, theatre and performance artists responded locally by innovating. This research points to the potential of the more expeditious introduction of support in enabling arts and culture to contribute to recovery.
- Outdoor and environmental performances have the potential to enable communal gathering and green recovery. However, increased administrative burdens were an impediment. The research questions the

wisdom of 'one-size-fits-all' policy interventions, and points to the importance of bespoke guidance and regulation to enable smaller events and performances that pose less risk.

From our research with local authority events officers:

- Events play a key role in local recovery, but smaller, arts-related events in outdoor spaces are overlooked in policy and would benefit from more tailored support.
- There is a need to focus investment and support in recruiting, retaining, training and upskilling local authority events officers who play an important role in mediating events and in balancing multiple stakeholder interests that require an enhanced understanding of public health and safety.

Key findings

From our research with theatre and performance artists (including survey, practice-research, interviews, audience research)

- Outdoor performances can cultivate new appreciations of local environments, emphasising the pleasures of sustainable living, supporting a sustainable recovery and 'building back better'.
- Innovative approaches to outdoor performance can enable live, dispersed, in-person audiences to gather in urban green spaces.
- Flexible and creative approaches from local authorities are key in supporting this work and increasing the range of outdoor spaces used for performance.

From an online questionnaire with theatre and performance artists:

- 80% had increased administrative burdens.
- 85% experimented with new forms of work.
- A shift to digital performance-making was mirrored by a smaller shift to working outdoors.

From an online questionnaire survey with local authority events officers:

- In 91% of cases, almost all events planned for summer 2021 were outdoors.
- There was unanimity that live outdoor events are vital to getting people back into towns and cities and 82% recorded strong demand from the public for live outdoor events during the pandemic.
- 72% reported that changing government guidance was their principal challenge during the pandemic.

Further information

Coles, T., Garcia, G., O'Malley, E. and Turner, C., (2022) [Experiencing event management during the Coronavirus pandemic: a public sector perspective](#). *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*.

Garcia, G., O'Malley, E. and Turner, C. (2022) Towards 'mundane' performance: theatre and the pleasures of sustainability, *Critical Stages*, 22 (forthcoming).

Project website: <https://openairperformance.com/>

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