



House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP
Secretary of State for Culture, Media & Sport
Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport
By email

15 June 2021

Dear Oliver

We are writing on behalf of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Classical Music, following the announcement that the next step in the roadmap for England has been delayed.

You will be aware that the move to Step 3 on May 17 was followed by the publication on 18 May of guidance which stated that *'non-professional singing indoors should only take place in a single group of up to 6 people.'* This had a major impact on the mental well-being of choir participants, for many of whom their choir is a lifeline out of isolation and loneliness and on the freelance musicians that lead these choirs, who find themselves unable to resume this vital part of their career. It also had a knock-on effect on suppliers, venues and other ancillary trades who benefit from such leisure-time music activity.

This guidance contradicted what the sector had been led to believe via your department, that at Step 3 *'non-professional activity will be able to resume from this time'*, and came in after implementation of Step 3 when many choirs had already started rehearsing.

Indeed, other non-professional activity – amateur orchestras, brass bands, theatre, dance, grassroots team sports – was allowed to resume from that stage. Only choirs were not permitted, a restriction which will continue for another month at least.

When we and other parliamentarians asked for the science behind this decision, we have been pointed to evidence which was published prior to the PERFORM study of August 2020. As a result of the conclusions of that government-commissioned research, choirs were permitted to meet indoors between August and December 2020 and your department published the *Safer Principles of Singing* in November 2020.

We have not been shown any new evidence which supports the implementation of additional restrictions on choirs. And since December 2020, vaccinations and lateral flow testing have been game-changers which make it even less likely that, thanks to the mitigations employed by choirs, Covid-19 would be transmitted at a rehearsal or performance.

There are now considerable and unexplained inconsistencies in the guidance:

- The PERFORM study concluded that singing and speaking both carried increased risk of transmission via droplets and aerosols at high volume. Yet while choirs are not permitted, shouting indoors above the music in the pub, or at an indoor grassroots sports event, or for dramatic reasons in an amateur theatre rehearsal or performance, are.
- It is unclear what the evidence is that professional singers – now able to resume in-person activity indoors – are less likely to transmit the virus than non-professional singers.

Given this, can you set out whether the Government has received further scientific advice around the safety of singing and, if not, why the guidance contains these inconsistencies?

We welcomed Caroline Dinenage's statement in her letter to some parliamentarians as well as to sector organisations that *'whilst it is for organisers and venues to determine how to operate in accordance with the relevant guidance and regulations, we would remind you that the limits do not apply to activity taking place for work or commercial activity.'*

This would appear to recognise that professional organisations such as orchestras engage the services of non-professional singers; there are tens of thousands of freelance professional musicians dependent on work from the non-professional choir sector; and the sector undertakes commercial activity of considerable economic value by staging an estimated 50,000 concerts a year for which tickets are sold, venues hired, sheet music bought etc. The total leisure-time sector has an estimated value of around £100 million a year.

It remains opaque whether the Minister's statement is designed to facilitate this activity. Most choirs, being small charities run by groups of volunteer trustees, find the burden of responsibility cast on them by the lack of clarity in this statement too much with its implication for insurance, risk assessment and individual decision-making,

Therefore, they feel they cannot proceed with rehearsals and obtain insurance, unless more clarity or interpretation is provided to give them peace of mind or go ahead with their choral activity, which means so much to so many of our citizens in the UK of all ages and in all communities.

We would be grateful if DCMS could issue a clarification as soon as possible and look forward to hearing from you. Given the importance of this issue, we will be publicising this letter.

Your sincerely,

Barbara Keeley MP
Chair

Lord Berkeley of Knighton CBE
Co-Chair

All Party Parliamentary Group on Classical Music