

News

Lloyd Webber in legal battle for Covid data

As large sporting events go ahead, live entertainment chiefs try to force ministers to publish results of pilots

By Anita Singh
ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER and Sir Cameron Mackintosh have launched a legal fight to force the Government to publish data on its pilot scheme for Covid-safe events.

They are among a group of leaders from the live music and theatre industries demanding to know why enter-

tainment events remain under severe restrictions, yet Wimbledon matches and football games can go ahead with large crowds.

"We simply must now see the data that is being used to strangle our industry so unfairly," Lord Lloyd-Webber said. "The Government's actions are forcing theatre and music companies off a cliff as summer wears on, whilst cherry-picking high-profile sporting events to go ahead. The situation is beyond urgent."

Lord Lloyd-Webber and Sir Cameron are joined in their legal action by Sonia Friedman and Michael Harrison, the theatre producers, and Live Ltd, which represents 13 live music industry

associations and a total of 3,150 businesses in the UK.

In a High Court application, they requested disclosure of all information relating to the Government's Events Research Programme, a pilot scheme which allowed large crowds with reduced or no social distancing and included the Brit awards and the world snooker championships.

The applicants may pursue an urgent claim for judicial review of the decision to delay the lifting of audience number restrictions beyond June 21.

On May 25, Oliver Dowden, the Culture Secretary, said the pilot events involved 58,000 people and said that only 15 positive Covid cases had been

logged. However, the data have not been published and the legal action accuses the Government of refusing multiple requests to disclose it, "despite their duty of candour".

The legal application states: "The applicants are not embarking on this application lightly. They do not in any way underestimate the importance of public health issues relating to Covid-19 and the need to ensure the safe reopening of live events."

"Nonetheless, the Government has consistently said that its decision making will be driven by scientific data, and the applicants, who helped ... to obtain data and, indeed, paid for it ... should be entitled to see the data in a transparent

way and the conclusions drawn from it." The Royal Albert Hall is among the organisations represented by Live, and Craig Hassall, its chief executive, said: "The chronic uncertainty and endless indecisiveness from Government, and pilot events with no published results, have damaged audience confidence and further harmed a sector that has already been decimated by the pandemic."

"For as long as venues like the Royal Albert Hall, and hundreds more across the country, are prevented from effectively operating with no justification, we cannot play our part in supporting the critical ecosystem of freelancers, small businesses and suppliers who rely on us and who are

so desperately in need of work." Sir Cameron said: "Having contributed huge amounts of money to the Exchequer over the last few decades, the theatre desperately needs to be supported in its hour of need or the Government will be responsible for the disintegration of one of this country's most priceless and irreplaceable assets after centuries of being the envy of the world."

His comments were echoed by Ms Friedman, who said: "We need absolute clarity on when and how we can fully reopen - to bring a show back to full production takes months in planning to rehearse and to build a box office advance."

Courts backlog now more than a third longer than last year

by Mason Boycott-Owen

VICTIMS of crime face a 43 per cent rise in delays getting justice because of a backlog in the courts system.

Ministry of Justice data show the average age of an outstanding crown court case between January and March this year was 147 days, over a third higher than 103 days at the same time last year.

One in five cases has now been outstanding for a year or more. The backlog, in part caused by the pandemic, has seen more victims of crimes such as sexual assault and rape waiting for their case to be heard by a judge.

There were 59,532 outstanding crown court cases in the first quarter of this year - the highest on record.

This includes 6,257 sexual offence cases, almost double the 3,751 at the same point in 2020.

Derek Sweeting QC, chair of the Bar Council, said: "In the recent Rape Review, the Government committed to significant increases in the number of cases that will be brought to court."

"Greater numbers of police officers will only increase these pressures in the coming years. Behind every number in this backlog are victims of crime, defendants, witnesses and their families, putting their lives on hold while they wait years to see justice done."

David Lammy MP, Labour's shadow justice secretary, said: "The Conservatives are forcing victims of rape, domestic abuse and violent assault to wait months and years for justice if they get it at all. This is the direct result of the Government's decade of court closures, combined with its incompetent response to the pandemic."

The Ministry of Justice said: "Dedicated staff and professionals kept justice moving during the pandemic and thanks to their efforts we are seeing positive results - outstanding cases in the crown court are beginning to drop, and have fallen by around 70,000 in the magistrates' court since last summer."

"Major challenges remain, which is why we are investing hundreds of millions to further increase capacity."



Spaced apart Epsom Choral Society rehearses in a multistorey car park in Epsom, Surrey. The choir decided to use the open-sided building, which is classed as an outdoor space where 30 can gather, after Covid-19 regulations were updated to prohibit amateur choirs of more than six singing indoors.

UK overtakes Israel with 64pc of population receiving first doses

by Dominic Penna

THE UK has now surpassed Israel, a long-time leader in coronavirus vaccination, with a higher percentage of Britons now having received a first dose.

The UK, which overtook Israel on Wednesday, has now given a first dose of the vaccine to 64 per cent of its population, including more than 80 per cent of all British adults.

This compares to 63.7 per cent of Israelis who have had their initial coronavirus jab. A further 207,647 first doses

were administered in the UK yesterday, and since last week appointments have been available to all over-18s.

This means that 31.9 million Britons have now had both doses of a coronavirus vaccine, which accounts for more than three-fifths of all adults.

Nadhim Zahawi, the vaccines minister, has said the four-week delay in the full easement of restrictions will be used "to get as many people protected and to protect them as quickly as we possibly can". Ministers plan to use walk-in centres, football stadiums and

"jabs buses" in order to administer as many doses as possible in the next three and a half weeks.

Israel remains ahead in terms of full vaccination, which real-world data have shown to prove significantly more effective against the Indian variant.

In Israel, 59.6 per cent of the population has had a second dose of a coronavirus vaccine.

In the UK, this figure stands at 46.7 per cent.

Health officials believe that the variant now makes up 70 per cent of all

31.9 million

Number of Britons who have had both coronavirus vaccine injections, or three fifths of all adults

cases in Israel, according to domestic newspaper reports. The town of Binyamina yesterday became the country's first "red" location for several months in light of 122 active cases, reflective of a

nationwide surge in infections. Dr Sharon Alroy-Preis, Israel's director of public health, said she believes nationwide restrictions making it compulsory to wear masks indoors will be brought back as soon as Sunday.

Israel this week moved to reintroduce legislation that means face coverings are once again compulsory at airports, hospitals and health clinics.

Three in 10 adults living in the European Union have been fully vaccinated, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

The UK rollout began on Dec 8 last year, with Margaret Keenan, 91, becoming the first Briton to receive an inoculation. She had the Pfizer jab.

Israel began its mass vaccination programme on Dec 20 after purchasing a substantial number of doses, and initially prioritised over-60s.

By the end of last year, Israel had administered more vaccines than all countries except for China, the US and the UK, and led the world for the highest number of doses given out per 100 people.

Japan emperor 'concerned' Olympics might spread virus

By Our Foreign Staff

JAPANESE Emperor Naruhito "appears concerned" that the Olympic Games could cause the coronavirus to spread, the head of the Imperial Household Agency said yesterday.

While the concern was framed as the official's impression rather than something he explicitly expressed, the rare insight into the monarch's thinking lit up social media, with many wondering if there would be a formal address.

"The emperor is extremely worried about the current status of coronavirus infections," Yasuhiko Nishimura, grand steward of the Imperial Household Agency, said yesterday.

"Given the public's worries, he appears to me to be concerned about whether the Olympics and Paralympics events, for which he is honorary patron, would cause infections to spread."

As news of the chamberlain's comment spread, "Imperial Household Agency Grand Steward" and related keywords were tagged on tens of thousands of posts on Twitter.

The emperor has no political power but is widely respected as a figurehead in Japan, although it is rare for him to make public statements. His attendance at the opening ceremony on July 23 has not been decided, the Imperial Household Agency said. Asked about the com-

ment, Toshiro Muto, CEO of the Tokyo 2020 Games, told reporters he did not believe that the chamberlain's remarks indicated that there were any problems with preparations for the Games, which were delayed for a year by the pandemic.

"Our responsibility is to alleviate the concerns of the public and ensure that the Games are held in a safe and secure



Emperor Naruhito, Japan's monarch, does not normally comment on matters of state importance

manner, and we will continue to work at that," Mr Muto said.

Many Japanese remain sceptical about the possibility of holding even a scaled-down Games safely during the pandemic. Organisers have excluded foreign spectators and limited the number of domestic ones for the event.

Alcohol, high-fives and talking loudly will also be banned. Japan has largely avoided the explosive outbreaks that have devastated other countries, but its vaccine rollout was initially slow and the medical system has been pushed to the brink in some places.



Lovebirds Fred Cobbett, 96, and his wife, Monica, 92, celebrate their 71st wedding anniversary by renewing their vows at Fred's care home in West Byfleet, Surrey.

IN BRIEF

Australian on hunger strike over quarantine

An Australian man whose mother died while he was in hotel quarantine has gone on hunger strike to draw attention to the difficulties faced by people who seek exemptions from Covid restrictions on compassionate grounds.

James Turbitt, who lives in Belgium, made an emergency dash home last week after he learnt his 62-year-old mother was in hospital in Perth, Western Australia. He was denied permission to break a 14-day quarantine on arrival in Melbourne to see her in hospital.

Warning over new Post Office text message scam

Trading Standards has warned of a new scam that appears to be a Post Office "failed delivery" text.

The text claims the recipient's parcel delivery failed and has been returned to the depot, the Chartered Trading Standards Institute (CTSI) said.

But the text contains a link to a fake website that looks like the Post Office one and asks for details to reorganise the delivery. The details go directly to scammers who use them to commit identity fraud. One man lost £80,000.

Katherine Hart, CTSI lead officer, warned of the "potential dangers".

Indonesia struggles with record rise in virus cases

Indonesia recorded its biggest daily increase in coronavirus cases yesterday with 20,574 infections.

The figures, released by the country's health ministry, also showed there were 355 new deaths, taking the total number of fatalities to 55,949.

Indonesia has the highest number of cases and deaths from Covid-19 in south-east Asia.

It came amid reports that authorities were taking as long as 14 hours to collect corpses from homes in Jakarta, the capital, given the surge in deaths and overstretched healthcare system.

Little Mermaid movie set hit by Indian variant

Filming of a Disney movie in Sardinia has reportedly been suspended after an outbreak of the Indian variant among the cast and crew.

Fourteen cases of the strain have been detected on the set of the film, a live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, according to Italian press reports.

The cast of the film includes Javier Bardem, Melissa McCarthy, Halle Bailey and Daveed Diggs, although it is not clear who was infected.

Disney was not immediately available for comment.