

14th October 2020

Dear Chancellor,

We reach out to you in the continued hope that at some point the business ministers and treasury will recognise and work with the £10bn wedding sector. Further to the recent announcements on the new three-tiered approach and associated support for businesses, we ask that you read our attached manifesto that summarises our position but also address the following three points in response to this letter.

1) As a minimum, please acknowledge that wedding businesses have been closed by the present restrictions

Our manifesto proposes capital grants via a 'Wedding Revival Fund'. On Friday 9th October you launched a support package of up to £3,000 per month for businesses that cannot trade due to restrictions. In our opinion that must apply immediately to all wedding businesses. Claiming we are "not closed" under a cap of 15 feels like nothing more than a technicality. Most wedding businesses have no other revenue streams. The equivalent would be saying a pub can only be allowed to trade for an hour a day or welcome only ten customers per day but is technically open, thus rendering the Government support schemes inapplicable.

The skilled jobs, hard-earned livelihoods and survival of world-leading businesses with the greatest bounce back potential of all sectors, as laid out in the manifesto deserve more than a technicality.

Our businesses have in fact remained closed since March as a result of Government restrictions and we need support to help carry us through to a period where we offer significant bounce back potential. To date, we feel that weddings have fallen through the cracks of hospitality support, excluded from the VAT reduction scheme and not benefiting from schemes such as Eat Out to Help Out, whilst still having to serve our couples who need support through this difficult period and carrying significant fixed costs. As our businesses simply cannot trade, the core Job Support Scheme provides little financial benefit. However, the businesses are viable and the skilled employees irreplaceable. We simply seek parity with the rest of the hospitality sector and other businesses that are being asked to close.

2) Grant us parity with the rest of the hospitality sector, allow us to self-help our sector, give hope to couples and lower the burden on the state

Only on Monday in the parliamentary debate the Prime Minister recognised that anomalies exist and that he will do whatever it takes to iron out any inconsistencies there may be:

"During a pandemic, life and love continue. I know that my right honourable friend, the Prime Minister, has strained every sinew to protect people's lives and liberty, but will he undertake to review, over time, the guidelines that say that a venue that could seat 200 as a restaurant could seat only 15 if it happens to be for a marriage ceremony?"

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)

“My honourable friend, like many members across the house, draws attention to what appears to be an anomaly in the regulations and in the guidelines. There are many such issues that we are doing our best to iron out, but when you are dealing with a pandemic such as this and when your only tool of influencing human behaviour is guidance, I am afraid that such anomalies inevitably arise. We will do whatever we can to iron out any inconsistencies there may be.”

Boris Johnson, Prime Minister

Following these discussions in Parliament and the new Government approach regarding the three-tiered system, the Association of British Wedding Businesses (ABWB) would like to provide you with a way forward for the wedding industry that would give the best and safest scenarios for each tier, but also go some way to ensuring the survival of the wedding industry.

As highlighted in the manifesto, our industry has been unfairly treated and penalised, to the point where without urgent support, it will suffer a catastrophic collapse, leading to the closure of thousands of businesses, soaring unemployment and a loss of around £5bn in tax receipts next year alone for the Government.

Nevertheless, we continue to find ways to cling to survival, adapting to each new set of guidelines which continue the disparity between wedding venues and the rest of the hospitality industry. With the announcement of the three-tiered system, we want to demonstrate to you how this could relate to weddings specifically.

Tier 1 ‘Medium’ – Weddings to be held with a socially-distanced capacity under the present strict wedding guidelines and in Covid-secure venues.

Tier 2 ‘High’ – Ceremonies and receptions to be held with a maximum of 15 people in attendance.

Tier 3 ‘Very High’ – Venues in the worst-hit areas are closed and no weddings will be held.

Tier 1

As mentioned in the manifesto and raised in Parliament by Andrew Griffith MP, weddings have been limited to an arbitrary capacity, currently 15, whereas other areas of hospitality have been operating to a socially-distanced capacity. These new tiered restrictions give the opportunity for the Government to provide parity for the wedding industry and a roadmap to recovery. All we are asking for is to be treated fairly and allow venues to work with a socially-distanced capacity in tier 1 areas, the same treatment given to restaurants in all tiers. We are equally professional venues with the same standards and procedures in place. We are aware that other European countries have allowed this for weddings given their societal importance with an upper cap of typically 100 people to avoid excessive groups in extremely large venues.

Northern Ireland's wedding venues have been operating with simple social distancing capacities since June with no associated outbreaks. We appreciate the difficulties in building data but there is evidence that weddings operating under strict guidelines are not drivers of outbreaks.

Currently, the vast majority of wedding dates are being cancelled or postponed. A change in capacity would encourage more couples to hold the few remaining weddings not cancelled or postponed through the winter, generating desperately needed revenue for venues and suppliers, and all while providing a safe environment that follows the Government's guidelines.

Despite some misconceptions among MPs, these will not be typical, pre-Covid weddings, but controlled, safe and responsible events akin to a restaurant meal. We would also be perfectly placed to pioneer rapid, on-the-door testing, as stated in our manifesto, to make the environment even safer and eventually benefit a number of other industries once we have shown how it can be implemented and evidenced how safe the post-Covid wedding reception environment actually is.

Not only would this allow some weddings in the immediate term to go ahead, but also provide an injection of confidence to future couples whose weddings require extended lead times because of the planning involved, and who currently cannot see beyond the Prime Minister's announcement that restrictions could be in place for up to six months.

Only with this in place can you say that wedding businesses are open to any degree in tier 1 areas.

Tier 2

Despite the concerns displayed in our manifesto about the viability of limiting numbers to 15, we recognise the balance between the economy and health and are willing to work with the Government's current guidelines for tier 2 areas, if it means that venues in tier 1 areas can operate to a socially-distanced capacity. Despite technically being open while accommodating up to 15 guests per wedding, all we are really doing is supporting the legal process of the marriage while rendering the host venue and supporting businesses impotent. Instead, nearly all weddings will be cancelled or postponed, and the ones that do take place will often create a loss for the venues involved. Wedding businesses in these areas must be deemed to be effectively "closed".

Tier 3

The decision to ban receptions from taking place in tier 3 areas is understood but needs to be accompanied by appropriate support.

3) Please commit to the Treasury holding a proper conversation with the sector to understand our bounce back potential and what we need to deliver that

It feels that whilst our sector hasn't benefited from significant grants such as Arts and Culture, or any of the additional benefits afforded to trading Hospitality businesses, this basic support of up to £3,000 grants per month and the enhanced Job Support Scheme would at least provide a bare minimum. However, we would request that a proper conversation is held to examine the business case for the Government in an enhanced support package. We have not been granted any such conversation since March.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Duncan Clark', written in a cursive style.

Duncan Clark

Chairman of the Venue Committee, ABWB

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