



Association of British
Wedding Businesses

WEDDINGS MANIFESTO

Survival To Revival

Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on the wedding industry, putting thousands of jobs, venues and companies at risk. Unlike some other areas of the hospitality industry, there has been a distinct lack of support, no special VAT treatment, no targeted campaigns such as 'Eat Out To Help Out', and a far more punishing set of restrictions to abide by that have resulted in the vast majority of weddings either being postponed or cancelled. In fact, the unfounded decision to limit numbers to 15 for up to 6 months has already wiped out a further **£750m** of desperately needed revenue.

The message is simple - support us through this crucial period and it will benefit everyone. Do nothing and a significant industry could fail completely.

We are a **£10bn** industry that provides **400,000** full and part time jobs. With postponed weddings on top of so many new bookings, there will be a groundswell in 2021 and 2022 of latent demand built up due to postponed weddings - we can bounce back strongly and drive the nation's recovery with increased revenues and additional jobs. Without support from the government, however, many companies will not last to see the industry bounce back.

"But for these extraordinary restrictions, these are viable jobs. These businesses are doing the right thing. Why has the government decided that these jobs aren't worth saving?"

Keir Starmer MP (on the wedding industry)

Survival

These points will help those in the wedding industry survive the current restrictions and help us plan for the way forward back to 'normality'.

1. Treat us fairly – There has been a perceived failure by Government to understand the industry. As a result, the restrictions have unfairly and unreasonably penalised the industry. We need parity with the rest of the hospitality industry, or we face a complete loss of business until restrictions are lifted. Limiting venues to an arbitrary number of 15 guests has no scientific support and shows the government has no faith in families, friends and professional managers to follow social distancing rules when relating to a wedding, but believes them to be fully capable when relating to a restaurant or pub customers. This severe restriction means that the vast majority of couples will now look to postpone or cancel their weddings.

Venue capacities need to reflect the number of people they can accommodate safely with social distancing and the trust to enforce the guidelines, instead of being treated differently. Venues in Northern Ireland have been allowed to operate this way and there have been no associated outbreaks as a result. Remember, a 'Covid wedding' does not include an evening party with dancing and is more akin to a civilised meal for family and friends.

"I point out that they are all struggling with guidance that says that there can be a religious or church service with as many people as can be Covid-safely accommodated, unless it includes wedding vows, or that a restaurant can have as many covers as is Covid compliant, unless there happen to be a bride and groom among them, in which case the number is restricted to 15."

Andrew Griffith MP

2. Capital grants through a 'Wedding Revival Fund' – Simply put, without these, huge numbers of venues and wedding businesses will fail, more jobs will be lost, unemployment costs will soar and couples will lose their payments. We have to get through to the bounce back opportunity or, in no time at all, a sector could be destroyed. Venues have unavoidable, very high ongoing costs. We suggest that all direct wedding-related businesses, including venues, caterers and suppliers could claim 10% of their audited turnover for the last financial year as a grant, which we estimate to total £450m. This will allow companies to make it through the next six months and ensure the survival of the wedding industry, while only costing a fraction of the expected tax receipts for 2021 alone.

"There will be sectors that take longer to come back - I don't think this Government is afraid of supporting where we can."

Mims Davies, Employment Minister

3. Enhanced Job Support Scheme – This has been beneficial while available but will soon end. The Job Support Scheme might support businesses facing a proportionate decline in demand but offers very little for those in the wedding industry which is effectively shut down by the Government restrictions and current proposals will result in thousands of job losses. Companies will be left with no choice but to make mass redundancies only to have to recruit again IF they survive until the industry is reopened. These devastating job losses can easily be avoided with an adapted and targeted furlough scheme to support the wedding industry.

The Chancellor, **Rishi Sunak**, has said looking for new ways to protect jobs is his *"Number one priority"*

4. Road Map – The uncertainty around the future of weddings, severe restrictions placed on them and ever-changing guidelines leaves companies with little knowledge of how the industry may return to 'normal', as well as casting doubt in the minds of couples whose weddings are supposed to take place after March 2021. Weddings have significant lead times. We need a road map of the steps that will be taken to reopen the industry in a safe manner, and that won't be changed instantaneously, so companies and couples can be reassured about the future. More than anything, our future booked couples need confidence and the latest announcements of restrictions up to six months not only means that weddings through to the end of March can effectively not take place but for the months immediately following it is difficult to see how weddings can then leap from a restriction of 15 to a 'reasonable' number of guests. Especially for the wedding industry with its built in lead time, a clear and comprehensive roadmap, although costless, is a critical thing Government can do for the industry. This should start with weekly meetings to share ideas and concepts, relevant data and a review of progress.

Revival

2021 and 2022 will provide a massive bounce back for the wedding industry, so the logical choice is to provide support now and reap the benefits for years to come. 2021 will bring **150,000** more weddings than a normal year, more than **50%** above average. Couples are desperate to get married, they have signed contracts and already paid huge sums of money. In addition to a significant increase in jobs created, that will also generate **£5bn** in tax receipts for the government, all from **£450m** in support. Employment will be up by **50%**, with up to 200,000 more jobs, keeping unemployment costs down for the government and helping the UK's economic recovery.

How will we get there

The key to reaching these bumper years is a gradual revival through an easing of restrictions, that can allow weddings numbers to return safely to normal and restore confidence in future couples. It is also essential to retain key members of staff who have many years of essential experience and business knowledge. For many companies these people are the DNA of long-established businesses.

1. Guidelines – Unlike so many other sectors, our events require long planning and lead times. Unlike a pub or restaurant, we simply cannot open and close the doors to wedding venues as the status of Covid-19 changes. Each time changes to the restrictions are announced, it takes several days for the updated guidance to be released, and further time for wedding businesses to consider and publish how the new guidance affects what they can provide before a booked couple impacted by the changes have the opportunity to digest everything and consider the further options, only for the guidelines to change again and the whole process to start afresh. This causes a tremendous amount of emotional stress and upset for couples, businesses and their employees.

We want to work in partnership with the Government to create guidelines that are applicable and relevant at all times, regardless of guest numbers being increased or decreased. We can provide the insight to map out how to deliver a Covid-safe ceremony and reception, before working together to periodically progress the guidelines through monthly meetings to include other elements of a typical wedding day. These guidelines would allow companies and couples to react instantly to any changes in attendance numbers, but still have a clear idea of the flow of the wedding day. This approach would remain in place until we reach a point where venues are allowed to work to a socially distanced capacity, or no restrictions apply.

2. Test and Trace – With adequate testing and a functioning Test and Trace system in place by spring 2021, venues, caterers and operators could confidently accommodate higher numbers and the wedding industry could begin its recovery. Starting with pilots this could involve pre-testing guests, on the door testing and 100% compliance from venues, suppliers and guests. New, low-cost rapid tests are now available that deliver results in 15-30 minutes rather than hours or days, and the wedding industry would be the perfect controlled environment to introduce these tests. These would greatly reduce the risk of spreading the virus and give couples and their guests more peace of mind when celebrating their wedding day.

3. Piloting – The wedding industry is already a controlled hospitality environment, making it the perfect setting for piloting a range of innovations. Venues know exactly who is attending and where they are coming from. They can also control actions and events throughout the day to ensure any relevant guidelines are followed, providing a much more controlled and trackable event than other hospitality sectors. As a result, we would be ideally placed for piloting variable guest numbers, different formats to the day, new testing options and technology, as well as data analysis to provide more insight. As suggested under **Guidelines**, these different aspects could be introduced only when deemed appropriate through monthly updates.

4. Technology – Grants have previously been available for companies to become Covid-secure, including an investment in technology. At that time weddings could not take place but an extension of this scheme now, particularly for investments in preventative technology that can minimise the spread of Covid-19, would allow wedding venues to return to a more normalised and safe environment.

Conclusion – The wedding industry is not asking for much, just to be treated fairly and given the same opportunities to survive that have been afforded to other areas of hospitality. We need support, yes, but the expenditure needed now pales into insignificance when compared to the return from the next couple of years. Without this, the industry is at risk of collapse, causing thousands of companies to close, and unemployment rates to soar, huge levels of tax receipts lost, financial losses for couples and emotional turmoil that all amounts to significant further societal and economic damage for the UK. Conversely, with the right support the wedding sector can make a hugely valuable contribution to the economic recovery of the UK.

Key information

Industry insight

Wedding sector is worth **£10bn** to the economy, **£15bn** in 2021 if it survives.

120,000 businesses, 400,000 involved in full and part time work.

Weddings are down at least 95% in 2020/21.

Venues are the 'apex' businesses (provide the marketplace for the supporting suppliers) and together with operators and caterers are the largest businesses and employers in the sector.

Weddings come with huge societal importance, they are a life event celebrated by friends and family. Changes to the restrictions need to be very carefully thought out and have scientific backing, as they have a significant impact on the couples and their guests.

There is no science to support the decision to restrict numbers further from 30 or 15. A venue-specific risk assessment should be in place as for restaurants and pubs.

Perfectly placed for instant pre-testing, 100% track and trace data, showpiece pilots.

Continuity is essential

Wedding businesses cannot hibernate:

- Weddings take months of advanced planning
- Significant on-going maintenance costs
- Need to retain staff to re-start operations (if venues can restart in April, recruitment and training needed well in advance of this)
- Future sales cannot stop if businesses are to survive

Listen to our industry

We have appealed directly to the Government for the following:

Requests for a roadmap – *nothing provided*

Requests for positive 'signposting' – *nothing provided*

Appeals for financial support – *no recognition to the plight of sub-sections of hospitality compared to other sectors*

Taskforce weekly meeting – *agreed but not delivered*

Ministerial time spend discussing the wedding industry – *2 hours total, nothing for over 10 weeks, further interaction denied*

VAT remains @ 20% – *venue hire and 'shared supplies' are excluded from 5% break for the rest of hospitality*

Weddings can be Covid-safe

There are clear and effective plans for Covid-safe weddings:

- Seated ceremony
- Seated drinks reception with table service
- Seated wedding breakfast
- No bar service or dancing
- Social distancing guidelines must be adhered to at all times
- Extra measures and regular cleaning at venues
- Test and trace in place
- Virtual attendance for the high-risk, elderly and vulnerable – *optional*