

Live art sector asks for \$850m, gets \$27m

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The live performance sector has welcomed \$27 million of new money from the Morrison Government targeted at indigenous and regional arts, and a music industry charity, but says it won't be enough to save many small companies.

Arts Minister Paul Fletcher said he had consulted widely to come up with three specific relief measures for the sector, which was shut down by the March 16th [ban on mass gatherings](#) to combat the spread of COVID-19.

There will be additional funding of \$10 million for regional arts, which the Minister noted were already reeling from this summer's bushfires, and \$7 million for indigenous arts in recognition that the pandemic had forced indigenous arts centres to close.

Meanwhile [Support Act](#), a charity which helps distressed music industry workers with direct grants and a counselling service, will get \$10 million. That is a transformative amount for an organisation that turned over \$1.7 million last year, according to chief executive Clive Miller, and comes as its services have never been in more demand.



*Arts Minister Paul Fletcher has secured an \$27 million for the coronavirus-ravaged performing arts sector, but they say much more is required for it to survive. **Alex Ellinghausen***

"The income support packages we've seen are great but there's a lot of people in the music industry who fall between the cracks," Mr Miller said.

"There's a few on the margins of the society - maybe they haven't paid tax for a few years, so they're reluctant to engage with the government. We've also been getting lots of SOS calls from Australian

musicians stranded in places like London, where they've now got no work but also aren't eligible for any help from the UK government."

The new money and its recipients were applauded by Live Performance Australia (LPA), which represents promoters and producers of performing arts as well as the venues in which they're staged, but it [repeated calls](#) for a tailored rescue package.

"We know a lot of industries have been impacted but we were the first in to this crisis, and given our sector's reliance on global networks, we'll be the last out," said LPA chief executive Evelyn Richardson.

The LPA asked for an [\\$850 million rescue package](#) just after the mass gathering ban, pointing out it generated \$2.2 billion in ticket sales in 2019 alone, employing 35,000 people directly and thousands more casually.

The subsequent passage of the JobSeeker and JobKeeper packages, the latter of which the Minister said would "deliver support worth billions of dollars to arts organisations", had ticked off some of LPA's wishlist.

Dashed hopes

However the peak body pointed out that many of the industry's casuals, particularly performers, never worked for an employer for 12 months straight and were thus ineligible for JobKeeper subsidies.

Immediate hopes for that to be rectified with a tailored industry package were dashed on Wednesday, when an amendment seeking one moved by Opposition arts spokesman Tony Burke was defeated in the Lower House.

The LPA is still hoping for \$180 million in additional Australia Council funding to help companies not merely keep what employees they can on their books, but avoid going into administration and disbanding altogether.

Dozens of well-known arts organisations including Australian Theatre for Young People, Barking Gecko Theatre Company, Sydney Writers Festival and Melbourne's iconic La Mama Theatre are currently on what Ms Richardson termed "life support", with just [a year of Australia Council funding left](#) and many with insufficient cash reserves to remain solvent for even half that time with no box office.

In a similar position are many of the small businesses which support live events, such as those providing sound, lighting, rigging, drivers, venues, security, trucking and catering.

In a letter last month to government, the bosses of Australia's three largest promoters - Live Nation, Frontier/Chugg and TEG Live - committed to pre-booking these contractors on rescheduled tours and pre-paying part of their invoices upfront, but suggested this would not be enough cashflow to save many of them.

Especially if, as veteran promoter Michael Chugg has [predicted](#), it may take a year for tours by international acts to resume in any meaningful way.

"We're talking here about the infrastructure of the performing arts, built up over many years, which we risk throwing away for want of short-term bridge funding," Ms Richardson said.

The LPA is already lobbying government for a marketing campaign when the economy reopened, Ms Richardson added, to help convince people to gather again in concert halls and arenas.

The body is also pushing for tax incentives for those brave enough to once again mount live productions.

"The community is going to need the performing arts more than ever after this crisis," she said.

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