

Coronavirus: \$345m arts ‘revival’ needed to ensure the show goes on

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- EXCLUSIVE

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Funds to ensure theatres are COVID-safe and a marketing campaign to promote cultural tourism are part of a \$345m suite of measures being proposed by the arts industry as the federal government considers a relief package for the sector.

The proposal, submitted to Arts Minister Paul Fletcher by Live Performance Australia, includes \$170m to reactivate theatre productions, festivals and live music, \$70m for client companies of the Australia Council, \$30m to enhance digital production and a \$75m marketing budget including e-vouchers to boost demand for live entertainment.

The Australian reported on Tuesday that Mr Fletcher was considering providing upfront cash injections for films, theatre productions and music festivals as part of a plan to revive the hard-hit arts sector.

The coronavirus pandemic stopped performances and closed galleries around the country, pushing Sydney venue Carriageworks into administration.

LPA, the peak body for Australia’s live performance industry, is working with the government and providing information to Mr Fletcher and the Office for the Arts.

“We have said what the components are, and where we think the strategic investment from government will best make an impact,” LPA chief executive Evelyn Richardson said.

“This amount of money is a targeted package to reactivate the industry, and we want it to come online from July.”

The consumer and marketing strategies were intended to link the arts and entertainment sector to the broader economic recovery, especially the tourism industry, she said.

Health measures under discussion include workplace health and safety programs for venue staff, adequate space between seats to ensure social distancing and - contact tracing.

The business investment stimulus worth \$170m is the biggest part of the package, including capital investment to kickstart major productions and tours that have been silenced through the coronavirus lockdown.

While Mr Fletcher is open to that idea, Coalition sources indicated to The Australian that he had rejected a proposal for the government to underwrite performances to make up for the likelihood that social-distancing rules would leave theatres empty for much of the year.

Some arts companies, including Opera Australia, have already flagged that it would be difficult to restart performances while social-distancing rules remained in place.

The opera's artistic director, Lyndon Terracini, on Monday said it was "not cost-effective to be playing socially distanced".

Ms Richardson told The Australian that the LPA would also push for the government to extend the JobKeeper wage subsidy program for the industry, in some cases until September next year.

It is due to end this September.

About 60 per cent of LPA members who applied for JobKeeper are receiving the subsidy, a survey has found.

That pitch is not costed as part of the \$345m package.

Under the proposal, \$25m has been earmarked to support regional venues while \$70m would be used by the Australia Council to help companies rebuild cash reserves, which have been depleted because of the lockdown.

"Getting our theatres open in spring is our first priority, followed by our larger events such as concerts and music festivals," Ms Richardson said.

"Our Kiwi cousins are back in theatres in the next two weeks with no physical distancing, so we believe our September timeframe is very achievable."