

opinion

'I went to a festival for the first time in over a year - and it was incredible'

A number of successful pilot events are proof the country can reopen this summer, says **Danielle Lett**



Last weekend, 10,000 music fans descended on the hallowed turf at Donington Park for the first major music festival in the midst of a pandemic. And what an event it was. If you'd told me over a month ago I'd be back in a field surrounded by hordes of people, I simply wouldn't have believed it.

The event, aptly-named the Download Festival Pilot, was one the government's many test events to see how the country can commence large-scale get-togethers in accordance with its Events Research Programme and roadmap out of lockdown.

Taking part in the first camping festival since the pandemic was certainly an honour. The event, which took place over three days, was announced only a month ago, and attendees all had to follow a number of guidelines in order to guarantee entry.

Firstly, everybody who bought a ticket needed a negative lateral flow test result which had to be done the morning of the festival. Without a negative test result via email or text, you wouldn't be let in. Anyone who happened to test positive after purchasing their ticket would be given a full refund.

Secondly, everyone was required to do a PCR test which needed to be sent off the day before or day of the festival. Upon arrival, all attendees had to also check in on the NHS Track and Trace app at the gates before being given a wristband. And finally, five days after the festival ended, everyone who attended will need to send off a second PCR test following the event.

The beauty of Download, besides being able to see live music for the first time in 16 months, was that it allowed attendees to have a pre-pandemic festival experience.

Once inside, there were no



While She Sleeps performing at the Download Festival Pilot event, which took place last weekend. Social distancing and mask-wearing were not requirements once inside the event

Picture: DANIELLE LETT

social distancing guidelines in place, and masks were not mandatory.

While it sounds risky, and even insane to many, events of this calibre are incredibly important as they allow the government and medical bodies to see the potential spread of the virus in a test site (with many attendees already fully vaccinated). Being back in that field, surrounded by thousands of other like-minded people and fellow music fans really hammered home how important the arts and entertainment sector is - and how much we've all missed doing what we love.

While the final results for the Download Festival Pilot experiment are still pending at

the time of writing, previous government pilot events have shown transmission rates are extremely low when everyone who attends is Covid-free and maskless. Just 15 Covid cases in total emerged from the 58,000 attendees who took part in a number of government-monitored events. These included the Brit Awards, the FA Cup final, the World Snooker Championships, an outdoor music festival in Liverpool, and two nightclub events.

Only two positive cases came from the 5,900 revellers who attended the Sefton Park outdoor music festival in Liverpool, a mere four across the 17 days of the World Snooker Championships - and none

whatsoever from the Brit Awards, even though everyone was mask-free and allowed to mingle freely.

The proof is in the pudding, and with such low case numbers, surely it is time to reopen the arts and entertainment sectors?

People's livelihoods are at stake, with many in the industry not having worked since the country went into lockdown back in March last year.

Ministers themselves have even said events such as these have not caused any outbreaks of the virus, with sport and tourism minister Nigel Huddleston telling fellow MPs in the House of Commons these events are safe.

If last weekend's Download

Festival Pilot provides similar results to the other events that have been held over the past few months, I don't see any reason why the rest of the country cannot open up on Monday, July 19.

Latitude, for instance, which is due to take place at Henham Park between July 22 and 25, is a huge boost to the local economy, and it would be a great shame if it was unable to run for the second year in a row.

We're well on track with the country's vaccination rollout programme and uptake has been great. Hopefully it's just a few more weeks to go before normality resumes across the sports, arts and entertainment sector.