

Suffolk nightlife crisis

'I'VE BEEN DEVASTATED BY THE GOVERNMENT'S LACK OF SUPPORT'

With just six weeks to go until the end of 2020, nightclubs up and down the country should have been gearing up for what would usually be their busiest weekends.

Year on year, Christmas and New Year's Eve bring in millions of pounds annually to the nighttime trade – but not this year.

2020's ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has meant clubs across England have been unable to operate fully, or in most cases, even open at all since March.

With unpredictability, constantly changing restrictions and now a second lockdown plaguing the nighttime sector, how long can these business owners carry on for before it's too late?

Earlier this year, Leyla Edwards opened up The Club, Ipswich's latest nightclub. Situated behind

Three local nightclub owners explain how they feel their industry has been left in the dark during the pandemic, and why another lengthy lockdown spells bad news for the nighttime economy. By **Danielle Lett**

the Cornhill, The Club only had its doors open for a few weeks before the pandemic forced her to temporarily shut her venue.

"We bought The Club back in February, and we were on target to make a profit. We used to open at 11pm every night and close at 4pm, and over the course of the year, we planned to put the profit back into getting everything fixed, so by the time 2021 came around we would have a really viable business. That was our plan - but we had to close three weeks after

opening due to government restrictions."

However, The Club, alongside many other licenced venues were given a lifeline as lockdown restrictions eased and they were allowed to reopen on Saturday July 4 if they were able to make their premises Covid-secure.

"We realised we could open as a bar, so we renewed our licence and spent quite a lot of money investing in furniture. We had to totally overhaul our plans, so during those few months we opened at 2pm and closed at 10pm every night – everything we had went into this reopening after the first shutdown. The roof had also fallen in over lockdown, so literally every penny was spent."

Rebranding itself as a bar (as only bars and pubs were given the greenlight to reopen), The Club was running at a third of its usual capacity, and with additional costs to account for, Leyla's venue began to lose more money than it was making.

"We needed extra doormen, and extra staff because of the table service. Before lockdown, it would cost us roughly between four and five hundred pounds to open – but it was costing us anywhere over £700 to open the doors. We were just scraping by every week."

"The Club received the £10,000 grant from the council, which everybody got, but that was back in April/May time."

The Small Business Grant was available to all small businesses across England, and was a one-off grant of £10,000 from local councils.

"Since then, we've had nothing. We've gone for so many grants – from live music grants, to just about anything that's been available, and they're completely ignoring the nightclub and music sector. Even myself, I'm a self-employed entertainer and I've had

nothing."

At the end of every week before the second lockdown, Leyla would have to decide whether opening the doors would be viable for another week. "Sundays were really hit and miss. We'd be open, but we would only have 20 people in."

Even with initiatives such as free open mic nights, those were proving to be additional costs that The Club eventually wouldn't be able to justify. "Even though they were socially distanced, we'd be spending money on microphone covers, anti-bacterial wipes, and staff to make sure people were keeping their distance from the stage. My partner and I weren't taking wages home – we had to make sure the staff and doormen were being paid."

Another Suffolk club owner who suffered a similar fate to Leyla is Mike Garling. Owner of The LP in

Bury St Edmunds, Mike's club stretches over two floors – with a restaurant and bar on the ground floor, and a nightclub upstairs. Prior to the pandemic, its capacity was 500.

"We transformed the nightclub into a lounge bar earlier this year – we put seating in there and socially distanced tables so it complied with restrictions," he explains. "We were feeling quite positive about the new changes – they were very well-received and had a lot of potential. But then they introduced the second lockdown which negated all of the investment we had made."

Much like Leyla, Mike has also been left in the dark due to little government support throughout the pandemic – and fears the ongoing crisis will have harmful effects on Suffolk's nightlife for

BORIS SAYS
RELAX...

NO
DANCING

Many Thanks!

The Club



Leyla Edwards, owner of The Club in Ipswich

Picture: CHARLOTTE BOND



"We've gone for so many grants - from live music grants, to just about anything that's been available, and they're completely ignoring the nightclub and music sector," says Leyla Edwards, owner of The Club in Ipswich

Picture: CHARLOTTE BOND



The LP had to overhaul its nightclub space in order to open as a bar between the first and second lockdown, offering customers table service
Picture: THE LP

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years to come.

"I've been devastated by the lack of support or even acknowledgement of the nightclub sector from the government – particularly the Arts Council. It had a pool of £1.57bn to dish out, and a venue not very far away from us, which has no more of a broad appeal to the community than us, received a huge grant. It would have been a delight if we received that, as it could have reserved the possibility of dancing and nightclubs in the future.

"I think the industry has been really unfairly singled out by puritanical forces who decided that it's good to cull the nighttime economy, without realising how vibrant and energetic these venues are. They make the locales they're in far more attractive. I've been saying for ages we need a night czar in the local council, to advocate on behalf of our venues for things like planning as we've never considered, and this pandemic just proves my point. For years, we've had this neglect of our industry and it's just horrifying. With no income, nobody can expect the future of the nightclub industry to last a year."

Although The Club and The LP were able to reopen between lockdowns, albeit for a short period of time, what about those venues who've not even been able to do that? Ark Nightclub in Newmarket is one of those venues.

Situated on the town's high street, Ark has been shut since March as its owner Ben Ark was simply unable to justify the costs of opening between the first and second lockdown.

"It would have cost us more to open safely than what we potentially could've made. It was just unviable," he explains. "We don't have gardens or car park facilities, it's literally just a venue."

Ben had made big changes to Ark at the start of the year to help diversify its offering – but lockdown happened, meaning the club has been unable to enjoy any of those benefits.

"We're a lot more versatile, so we can host a variety of events such as comedy, sports, shows and live music alongside the club nights. Well, that's what we thought until lockdown, which was obviously been quite the blow to us."

Having also been rejected by the Arts Council for funding, Ben feels he is fighting an uphill battle trying to save his venue – which is one of the few remaining in the town.

"We're the only venue that can cater to the array of things we do. The other big club that was here in Newmarket, that's now a block of flats, and the other is a Wetherspoons. We are the only venue left, and without us, what reason will there be to go into Newmarket after 9pm? There's no nightlife without it."

And it's not just the clubbers who will suffer – the domino effect following the closure of

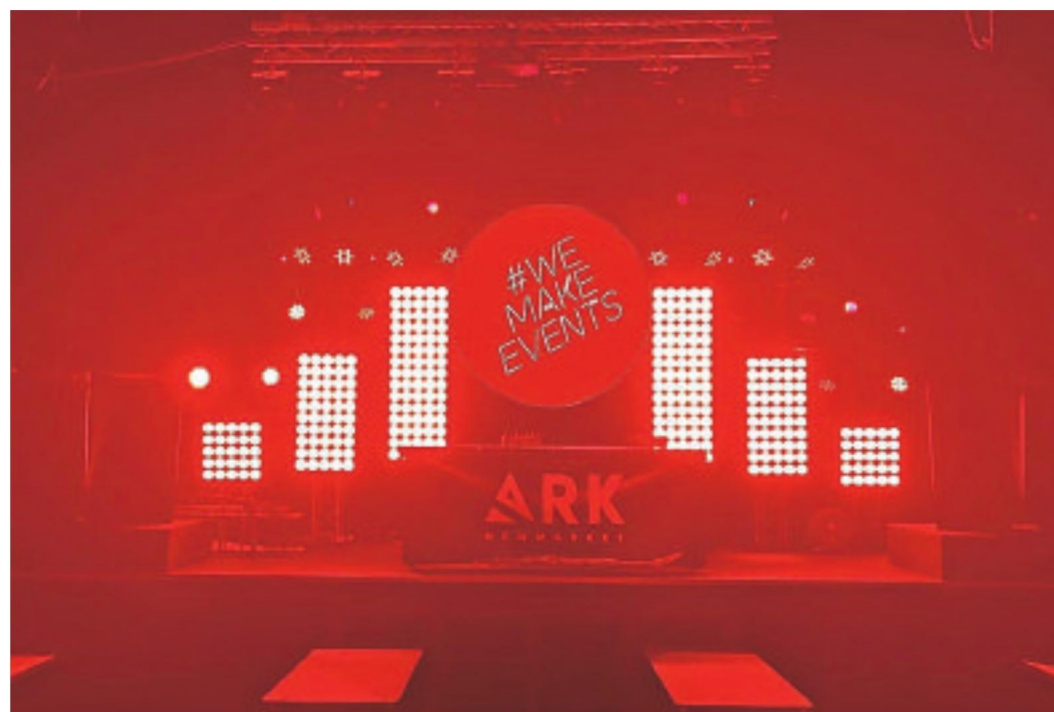


nightclubs has affected a number of other industries as well.

"From the promoters who come to the venue, to the taxi services, where a big chunk of their work falls on evenings and weekends, we're the main source of income for them. You also have to remember the third-party workers too – the production and sound companies, the technicians we employ, the printers who design and create our artwork, the drinks companies whose alcohol we supply – even down to the cleaners. There's such a knock-on effect, and it's pretty disheartening."

With the nighttime sector having already suffered this year, is there a future for nightclubs once the pandemic has ended?

"This is the worrying thing – when all of this has passed, will people have the confidence to go out? Or will they have reached a new norm, where Saturday nights are for takeaway and a film? Will people want to go out again? We asked the question to our friends and families, and some people can't wait to go out, whereas others are getting used to this new way of life they've been enduring for the last six months."



Ark nightclub in Newmarket lit up red as part of the We Make Events campaign - highlighting the plight of the entertainment industry during the pandemic

Picture: BEN ARK



A packed night in The LP prior to the pandemic. Will Suffolk clubbers ever enjoy a night out like this again in the future?

Picture: THE LP



Inside of The LP, when it was operating as a bar rather than a nightclub in order to comply with government restrictions
Picture: THE LP

A current list of local electricians



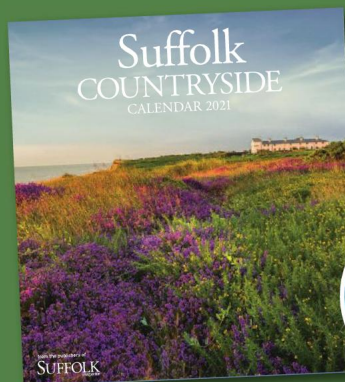
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