



ESU-Information

Lessons from the coronavirus pandemic for European fairground culture

Review in Scotland

Statement by the Scottish section of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain



Junior Vice President Alex James Colquhoun (third from left) and President Keith Carroll (centre) of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain surrounded by ESU members at the 2025 Congress in Edinburgh.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit many areas of public life with full force in spring 2020 – one of the hardest-hit sectors was the fairground industry. From traditional fairgrounds to Christmas markets, thousands of events across Europe were cancelled. The sudden cancellation of the 2020 event season – and, in some cases, 2021 as well – led to an unprecedented slump in revenue.

The Scottish COVID 19 Inquiry and the voice of the showmen

The Scottish COVID 19 Inquiry, established by the Scottish Government in February 2022, aims to comprehensively investigate pandemic management in Scotland between 1 January 2020 and 31

December 2022. In addition to public institutions and health issues, it also focuses on the impact on economic sectors – including the fairground industry and fairgrounds.

In his contribution to the investigation, ESU Vice-President Alex James Colquhoun, who was chairman of the Scottish section during the coronavirus pandemic and is now Junior Vice-President of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, impressively describes the dramatic consequences of the pandemic for the fairground industry in Scotland.

He reports that the 2020 pandemic caused almost all fairgrounds to be cancelled – from small local fairgrounds to major historical fairgrounds such as the Kirkcaldy Links Market, one of the oldest folk festivals in Europe, which has been held continuously since 1304.



As in many sectors of the economy, the coronavirus pandemic has brought the issue of health to the forefront of the European fairground industry. At the ESU Congress 2025 in Edinburgh, Sheldon Chadwick and Courtney Caris from the organisation 'Showmen's Mental Health Awareness' reported, among other things, on the massive health consequences of the disease for affected showmen and showwomen and their families in the United Kingdom.

Loss of an entire season

For many showman families, their main source of income was lost – not just temporarily, but permanently for the duration of the pandemic. Numerous businesses had to resort to loans to make ends meet. Colquhoun emphasises that this was not merely a postponement of income, but a complete loss of an entire season. Despite the suspension of business operations, expenses such as insurance, technical maintenance and servicing remained the same.

According to Alex James Colquhoun, a key problem was the difference between fixed leisure facilities and travelling showmen: the latter had little access to support programmes because their business model was 'not static'. In addition, short-term cancellations of markets or events led to high upfront costs, e.g. for staff, goods or transport.

Political commitment and financial support for showmen's businesses

The Scottish Section of the Showmen's Guild worked closely with politicians such as Margaret Ferrier, Richard Lyle, David Linden and Christina McKelvie during the coronavirus pandemic.

Through targeted campaigns and contacts in the Scottish Parliament, they succeeded in making the voices of showmen heard. At the end of 2020, the Scottish Government agreed on a financial package specifically designed for showmen and fairgrounds. This success was directly attributable to the initiative of showmen's representatives and their political allies. At the same time, the Travelling Funfairs Licensing Scotland Bill promoted more flexible and faster licensing procedures to enable a rapid response to cancellations due to disruptions.



Junior Vice President of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain and ESU Vice President Alex James Colquhoun (left) with the ESU Presidium at the 2025 Congress in Edinburgh: (from left) Secretary General Steve Severeys, President Albert Ritter, Vice President Atze Lubach-Koers, Deputy Secretary General Nina Crommelin, Vice President Nicolas Lemay. Missing from the photo: Vice President Are Arnardo.

Assessment: Sustainability and lessons learned

The statement issued by the Scottish section of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain provides several important lessons:

- Regulations governing travelling trades must be pandemic-proof and flexible.
- Financial support systems should take into account the specific operating structures of showmen.
- Investment in the preservation and development of the cultural heritage of fairgrounds is essential – with a view to tradition and the local economy.
- Involvement in the Scottish COVID 19 inquiry ensures that the voice of the fairgrounds industry is heard – as part of Scotland's economic diversity and as a bearer of regional identity.

The next steps

In June 2025, the public hearings of the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry came to an end in Edinburgh. The final report of the commission of inquiry is expected at the end of 2025. It will identify

failures, clarify responsibilities and formulate concrete recommendations for crisis preparedness in Scotland.

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