

## **Coronavirus: Chester's Storyhouse announces July reopening plans**

Storyhouse in Chester could be among the first arts organisations in the country to reopen after lockdown, with plans to welcome the public back early next month.

Artistic director Alex Clifton said Storyhouse would restart some parts of its operation as soon as possible, despite many theatres planning on remaining closed to audiences for several months yet. He stressed that "not being able to produce isn't the same as not being able to open".

Plans are underway to open the building, which incorporates a theatre, cinema, library and restaurant, as soon as government guidance permits, which could be as early as July 4.

This is the date cinemas are expected to reopen, and if guidance allows, the organisation plans to launch a drive-in cinema – which could become a drive-in theatre later in the year – as well as reopen its existing cinema and convert its theatre auditorium into another cinema, both operating at 25% capacity.

Its restaurant will reopen for takeaway food and drink, and Storyhouse's library will offer a click and collect service. Public spaces in the building, used by community groups, schools and for other classes, will also reopen, in line with social distancing requirements.

Two-thirds of Storyhouse's community programme has continued during lockdown by shifting online, Clifton said.

He told *The Stage* that he wanted to begin bringing these activities back into the venue, and felt it important to acknowledge the varied roles that theatres play.

"I just think the language of hibernation is a real problem and a danger because it becomes how government understands us. We are theatre producers, but we aren't singularly theatre producers, we're diverse buildings," he said.

Clifton added: "Our mission is not to put on plays, we put on plays to achieve our mission. I just need to stop talking and stop reading about how we can't reopen our theatres, because there's so much we can do. We need Storyhouse to find ways that it can serve its communities who are so loyal to us."

Clifton said 2,000 people had signed up to become members of Storyhouse in the past two weeks alone as part of a recently launched survival campaign.

The organisation's future remains in jeopardy as a result of the pandemic, Clifton said, but he promised to "relentlessly pursue" its responsibility to its community.

Earlier this month, the theatre postponed its Grosvenor Park open-air theatre season, saying the lack of clarity from government over which outdoor events will be permitted had meant it could not commit to "opening in this vacuum".

Clifton said he was angry at not being told by government whether they could go ahead with the season, and had grown impatient with the lack of guidance around how venues can restart operations.

"I'm bored of waiting for the government to tell me how to run my business. I know how to do it, I know how we can safely operate... We need to find a positive focus about what our buildings can do to serve their communities and a positive focus about what elements of our building can open," he said.