# Liverpool's hospitality sector grapples with the fallout from the pandemic



In March 2020, the hospitality sector in Liverpool faced an unprecedented crisis as the nation prepared to enter its first lockdown amid the growing COVID-19 pandemic. On March 20, Paul Askew, chef patron at The Art School Restaurant on Sugnall Street, addressed his staff to inform them that they were being sent home indefinitely, a decision that left many with a sense of uncertainty and fear about their future.

The lockdown followed a series of announcements from the then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who on March 16 urged the public to avoid pubs, bars, and restaurants, a message reiterated in his nationwide address four days later. By March 23, the lockdown became a legal reality, forcing the closure of dine-in services across the country and sending the hospitality industry into turmoil. The Liverpool City Region alone experienced an estimated £3 billion loss in its vital tourism and visitor economy over the ensuing months.

Reflecting on those initial days, Askew recounted, “They're more nightmares than memories... It was a really bad moment for the whole country and the whole world.” He described the emotional toll on both management and staff, expressing his fears for their well-being, his business, and his own family amidst the uncertainty.

On Hackins Hey, Fiona Hornsby and her husband, Dominic, were on the brink of launching their new venture, The Denbigh Castle, when the lockdown struck. Having taken over the premises, formerly Jupiters Bar, in February 2020 with plans to open that spring, the couple was halted in their tracks. Hornsby recounted the sense of disbelief: “We had to stop all the work. It was heartbreaking and terrifying.”

As they assessed their financial situation, they initially believed the lockdown might last only three weeks. However, as the situation evolved, Hornsby described an overwhelming sense of dread setting in as they faced the reality of keeping not just their business afloat but also their staff’s livelihoods. “The big thing was how are we going to get paid, how are we going to pay our suppliers... The fear was horrendous,” she recalled.

Oliver Clarke, managing director of The Baa Bar Group, which operates several venues in Liverpool, including Goose Street and Café Tabac, shared similar anxieties. He reflected on the swift turn of events, indicating he had returned from holiday only to find himself grappling with the reality of venue closures. “It was a scary time. There was a lot of uncertainty whether we were all going to survive it personally,” he stated.

As the pandemic persisted, hospitality venues faced a myriad of restrictions, some resorting to takeaway services while others attempted to weather the storm through government assistance like the furlough scheme and bounce-back loans for small businesses. In summer 2020, venues gradually reopened under strict regulations, but for many, the experience was far from ordinary.

Hornsby reopened The Denbigh Castle that summer, noting it was a “painful start” as they had to enforce rules for customers they had yet to meet. The initial months after reopening remained challenging, as capacity restrictions and a host of safety regulations hindered their ability to operate fully. “You were never full and you never got a sense of how the pub was going to be,” she said.

For Clarke, operating venues during the pandemic meant constantly adjusting to the ever-changing rules. He noted the challenges of maintaining security and order as customers sought to enjoy their time out, highlighting an incident where patrons struggled to adhere to seated requirements. “You needed even more security staff to manage people coming in and out, sitting down,” he explained.

As restrictions rolled in and out, some venues had moments of success while others were left grappling with closures. By spring 2021, and particularly in April, Hornsby described a sense of joy returning to her pubs as they reopened again: “It was probably some of the most fun I’ve ever had in my 30 years in the hospitality trade.” Patrons were eager to socialise once more, leading to a vibrant atmosphere as many relished the opportunity to be with others despite the lingering effects of the pandemic.

The fluctuating restrictions came to a head as winter 2020 brought another closure period, which many operators, including Hornsby, labelled the “longest, most miserable time.” It was not until March 2022 that most COVID-19 regulations were lifted, allowing for a more familiar atmosphere. However, the road to recovery was riddled with ongoing challenges.

The financial impact of the pandemic on the hospitality sector remains significant, with many venues still suffering from the after-effects. The ECHO reports that the looming cost of living crisis and upcoming increases in employer National Insurance contributions pose further threats to an industry that is trying to regain its footing.

Paul Askew stated, “Unfortunately for us, the sector has never really recovered since. The sector has lurched from one set of terrible circumstances to the next,” as he anticipates the impact of new economic pressures. With the hospitality sector grappling to navigate this complex terrain, the long-term repercussions of the pandemic are likely to be pervasive as owners strive to adapt in an ever-evolving landscape.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://marketingliverpool.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Recovery-Plan-2021-VERSION-7-Recovered-1.pdf> - This document supports the article's discussion of the significant impact of COVID-19 on Liverpool's tourism and hospitality sectors, highlighting financial losses and the need for recovery plans.
* <https://www.thewomensorganisation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Rethinking-the-Economy-for-an-Inclusive-and-Sustainable-Future.pdf> - This report provides insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic affected businesses and sectors in Liverpool City Region, including tourism and hospitality, aligning with the article's discussions on economic impacts.
* <https://www.propertyinvestortoday.co.uk/article/2025/03/the-impact-of-tourism-on-liverpools-property-market/> - The article highlights the current growth of tourism in Liverpool and its influence on the property market, contrasting with the earlier pandemic challenges described in the original article.
* <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-what-you-need-to-do> - This UK government guidance page offers historical context on the COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions that affected businesses like those in Liverpool during 2020.
* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-52192914> - News reports from 2020 detail the initial lockdown announcements and their immediate impacts on businesses in the UK, including those in Liverpool.