

Festival of Brexit is a £120m flop



Ysheel Black promotes a festival of plants in Birmingham. See Monster, the Weston-super-Mare installation, as it was supposed to look CAMERON SMITH/GETTY IMAGES; SWSN

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It was meant to be a patriotic celebration of what Britain could look like after leaving the EU.

But despite being supported with £120 million in public funds, the so-called Festival of Brexit has fallen woefully short of hitting a target to attract 66 million visitors. Only 238,000 people have turned up so far.

The figures emerged yesterday as the event's organisers were accused of using it to push "woke" causes, such as gender fluidity and "how imperialism shaped the British garden".



See Monster, the Weston-super-Mare installation, as it actually looks
ALAMY

Unboxed, as the festival is called, has been running for six months, with ten events across the country and more planned, including a drag queen “story time” in Birmingham “that celebrates the imagination and play of gender fluidity in childhood”.

David Jones, the former Brexit minister, said the event was “beyond parody in terms of wokeness”.

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He added: “It’s clearly been hijacked by people who probably don’t approve of Brexit anyway but most certainly don’t share the values of most people who did vote for Brexit.”

The member for Clwyd West said the cost was “absolutely shocking”, especially during the cost of living crisis.

“Taxpayers’ money is being wasted on events which are at best trivial and [at worst] positively subversive,” he said. “I am sure a lot of people will be extremely concerned that money has been applied that way.”

The festival was derided in March as a “recipe for failure” by MPs on the culture, media and sport committee who questioned “whether people understand the vision for Unboxed or even know that it is happening”.

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The project director is Martin Green, who helped to organise the opening and closing ceremonies for the London 2012 Olympics and the Birmingham Commonwealth Games in July.

He told *The House* magazine, which covers parliament, that it was “unfortunate” the project was stuck with the Brexit tag.



PoliNations in Birmingham is a festival of plants

The idea was announced by Theresa May in 2018 and called Festival UK 2022. Her vision was that it would show “the best of British creativity and innovation, culture and heritage” after Brexit. It was supposed to evoke the spirit of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Festival of Britain in 1951. The proposal was supported by Jacob Rees-Mogg, who said: “A Festival of Brexit would be excellent.”

The name stuck, despite the event becoming Unboxed: Creativity in the UK under Boris Johnson’s tenure. *The House* reported that Green, however, had asked ministers: “Can I ascertain it’s not a Brexit festival? You don’t want some kind of jingoistic jamboree?” He told *The House*: “We all must learn from this. Rule one of major events: don’t politicise them. Unfortunately a few chose to politicise it from the beginning.”

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Earlier this year he told *The Times*: “If you start from a political agenda, one way or the other, then you’re not trying to bring people together.”

He was right. The government has been left with a £120 million bill for events attended by fewer than 250,000 people. Julian Knight, chairman of the digital, culture, media and sport committee, said yesterday: “We sounded the alarm months ago that a project with such a vague vision and nebulous name seemed doomed to failure.”

A select committee report found ministers had failed to communicate a “compelling vision” to the public. The Labour MP Jess Phillips said: “Today is the first time I have heard of the Unboxed festival, so a target of reaching the entire population of the UK may have been a little ambitious.”

A spokesman for Unboxed said they had “established a new model for national festivals”. He added that the local response was “fantastic” as the project went to places “often underserved by the cultural sector”.

He said the scheme had supported hundreds of jobs and “development opportunities for young creatives”, adding: “With some of the biggest Unboxed projects opening this month . . . it’s much too early to talk about engagement numbers.”

Outside the box

- Unboxed events across the country included the Tour de Moon in Southampton, Newcastle and Leicester, a celebration of nightlife and countercultures.
- In Weston-super-Mare a North Sea oil platform is being transformed — belatedly — into an art project covered in trees and plants. Titled See Monster, it will have an amphitheatre at the top where the shipping forecast will be played. It was expected to bring more than 200,000 visitors last month but its opening was delayed by construction problems.
- In an event known as Green Space Dark Skies, groups who would not

usually have access to green spaces go out onto the water of the Norfolk Broads on boats and hold up lamps for a video.

- Another event, Dreamachine, which has been rolled out across the country, involves strobe lighting and sounds that give visitors a hallucinogenic experience behind closed eyes. Afterwards, they are given crayons to draw what they experience. Nadine Dorries, the culture secretary, is among those who have tried this.

- PoliNations in Birmingham, starting today, is a festival of plants which includes sessions on the “possibilities of decolonial practice within art and horticulture”.

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