



## Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Monday, 4 August 2025

**Sir Chris Bryant MP**  
**Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism**  
**Department for Culture, Media and Sport**

Dear Sir Chris,

### Live Comedy

Earlier this year, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee held its first *State of Play* evidence session, a new strand of work to ensure the sectors and issues within the remit of DCMS that may not otherwise receive scrutiny, are discussed in Parliament and heard by Government. Our first session focused on live comedy, thanks to a compelling proposal from the Live Comedy Association (LCA).

The live comedy sector has an estimated turnover of over £1 billion,<sup>1</sup> and is experiencing impressive growth across the country. While the 2024 Live Comedy Survey—a collaboration between the LCA, the Centre for Comedy Studies Research and the British Comedy Guide—identified that almost a third of organisations within the sector are focused around London and the South East, there is a spread of comedy organisations and events across urban areas across the UK, with a significant industry within the North West. It is an industry that is led by small businesses (the average comedy organisation involves 11 people) and crucially by freelancers on-stage and off.<sup>2</sup>

During our evidence session, we firstly heard from Geoff Rowe BEM, the founder of the Leicester Comedy festival, Jessica Toomey, Director of Frog and Bucket in Manchester and FAB Management and co-director of the Women in Comedy Festival, and Dr Sharon Lockyer, Director of the Centre for Comedy Studies Research, Brunel University London and lead on the Live Comedy Survey. They reflected the work of the LCA and set out the findings of the survey and challenges specially facing comedy organisations. We also heard from comedians Kate Cheka and Matt Forde, and the founder of Funny Women, Lynne Parker, to consider the experiences of comedy performers and the social benefit of comedy. We also received correspondence and information from others working in and with the comedy industry. We are grateful to all those who engaged with our work.

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<sup>1</sup> [Comedysurvey.co.uk](https://comedysurvey.co.uk), [UK Live Comedy Sector Survey Report 2024](#), 6 February 2025, p3

<sup>2</sup> [Comedysurvey.co.uk](https://comedysurvey.co.uk), [UK Live Comedy Sector Survey Report 2024](#), 6 February 2025, p6



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Rather than publish a report following the session, we have waited until the Government published its Creative Industries Sector Plan, and its response to our work on film and HETV before considering our next steps. Based on what we have heard, we are writing to summarise the key issues identified in our session and invite DCMS to respond to the proposals and questions that the evidence has raised.

### Recognition of live comedy

Comedy is an integral part of our creative industries, spanning TV, radio, podcasting, films and publishing. It provides entertainment and escapism, while also offering a means to discuss and debate topical and often controversial issues in an accessible way. In the BBC's May 2025 report on the socioeconomic impact of BBC Comedy, the corporation found that 70 per cent of people think British comedy can offer a reflection of Britain today, and a similar number talk to friends and family about comedy.<sup>3</sup> *Gavin and Stacey* was the ratings winner of Christmas Day last year, with a third of the country watching it either live or on catch-up.<sup>4</sup>

At the heart of comedy are the live performances that bring audiences together. This summer's great British film, *The Ballad of Wallis Island*, was created by and starred Tom Basden, who won the Edinburgh Comedy Award's Best Newcomer in 2007, and Tim Key, who won Best Show in 2009 and returns to the Fringe this year. Matt Forde told us of the huge impact that podcasting and social media has had on growing his audiences.<sup>5</sup> But ultimately, as Kate Cheka told us, it is live comedy itself that ensures that comedians and the industry as a whole can continue to be economically viable.<sup>6</sup>

The Live Comedy Association's central call in its proposal for our evidence session, backed by the results of the Live Comedy Survey, is for the recognition of live comedy as an art form.<sup>7</sup> Other than in the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, live comedy has had to seek to fit into definitions of live theatre or other arts forms to be considered for funding.<sup>8</sup> But the infrastructure, workforce and audiences are different, leaving the sector ignored by Government and funding bodies, including Arts Council England.

Since our evidence session, the Government has committed to holding a roundtable with the comedy sector.<sup>9</sup> However, to date there does not appear to have been any progress on the very small step in the right direction. The Government's Creative Industries Sector Plan, which promises a direction for the next 10 years, makes no

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<sup>3</sup> BBC, [Socioeconomic impact of BBC Comedy](#), May 2025, p2

<sup>4</sup> BBC, [Christmas Day Ratings 2024](#), 26 December 2024.

<sup>5</sup> [Q47](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Q49](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Comedysurvey.co.uk, UK Live Comedy Sector Survey Report 2024](#), 6 February 2025, p3

<sup>8</sup> [Q6, Q9](#).

<sup>9</sup> [PQ38399](#), 26 March 2025



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mention of comedy, and in our evidence session earlier this month on the Plan, the Government was not able to provide any further evidence of work on this sub-sector.

**Given the economic and social contribution of comedy, and the importance of live comedy as part of this, we support calls for a formal recognition of live comedy as a distinct art form. In practical terms, at a first step this should mean increased engagement by DCMS with the sector and with Arts Council England on how it considers and funds live comedy.**

This year's Live Comedy Survey is currently seeking submissions until 18<sup>th</sup> August.<sup>10</sup> As our witnesses recognised, the sector is fragmented and there is a limit to the amount of data that a survey can accurately provide from across the sector.<sup>11</sup>

**As part of its recognition of live comedy, the Government should work with funding bodies to establish an independent, accurate assessment of the size and distribution of the live comedy sector.**

### Comedy across the UK

This month the focus of live comedy is on the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.. But, fringe festivals take place across the country, from Guildford to Durham. Comedy Gardens pop up throughout the summer. And the UK's music festivals will draw audiences into their comedy tents as part of their eclectic line-ups. Long-running comedy festivals, like Machynlleth and Leicester, and industry gatherings such as the BBC's Comedy Festival, most recently in Belfast, provide opportunities for performers and for local businesses.

The Edinburgh Fringe is, alongside video sharing and social media apps, the main way for acts to be discovered. Yet, as our witnesses warned, it is prohibitively expensive to take part in. The Live Comedy Survey found that average turnover of a comedian is £26,778 per annum,<sup>12</sup> but as Kate Cheka cautioned to us, a comedian taking part in Edinburgh is expected to lose £10,000.<sup>13</sup> And, as Matt Forde explained, the model for the Fringe is that an artist is taking all the risk, potentially selling out a run and still making a loss.<sup>14</sup>

The unaffordable costs of the Fringe, including for audiences, is restricting participation and reducing the diversity of acts. As Matt Forde explained, this is largely driven by "exorbitant" accommodation costs.<sup>15</sup> These direct costs are a matter for the local authority in Edinburgh and for the Scottish Government, and it is welcome that changes

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<sup>10</sup> <https://comedysurvey.co.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> [Q20](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Comedysurvey.co.uk](https://comedysurvey.co.uk), [UK Live Comedy Sector Survey Report 2024](#), 6 February 2025, p3

<sup>13</sup> [Q43](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Q43](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Q41](#)



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have been made to relax stringent short-term let regulations for the duration of the Fringe.<sup>16</sup>

We have launched an inquiry into Major Events that will consider the challenges and opportunities of cultural and sporting showpieces and the support that governments can provide, including to the Edinburgh Festivals.<sup>17</sup> **The barriers to participation in and attendance at events such as the Fringe will be part of our scrutiny of our inquiry, and we look forward to hearing from the Government on the actions it is taking in this area.**

### Venues

The Government's Creative Industries Sector Plan, although lacking any specific mention of comedy, does contain a welcome recognition of some of the challenges that live comedy has in commons with other parts of the sector.

Live comedy benefits from being relatively cheap to put on, filling gaps in theatre and music venue programmes and taking advantage of spaces in pubs, clubs and community spaces to bring comedy to towns and cities across the country.<sup>18</sup> But the venues that do put on shows are not immune to the challenges faced by other live events venues, as we have considered in our work on *Grassroots music venues*<sup>19</sup> and will form part of the *Fan-led review of live music*.<sup>20</sup> The 2024 Live Comedy Survey includes forwards by both the Music Venue Trust and the Night Time Industries Association, recognising the literal and figurative shared spaces in which these industries work.<sup>21</sup>

Increased energy bills, rising business rates, NICs and the National Living Wage are all placing pressure on venues,<sup>22</sup> and as with GMVs, there is a limit to which performers, venues and ultimately audiences are willing and able to shoulder these increased costs despite increasing demand for comedy.<sup>23</sup>

As with live music, live comedy relies on the grassroots. As Matt Forde told us, new comedians must be prepared to work for free, to earn the purported "10,000 hours" to become expert, and to travel the country.<sup>24</sup> But, at the top of industry are the comedians and shows that can fill arenas. Venue owner and operator Jessica Toomey

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<sup>16</sup> The Herald, [Edinburgh Airbnb rules eased for Fringe Festival accommodation](#), 31 January 2025

<sup>17</sup> Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Major events inquiry](#), launched 23 July 2025

<sup>18</sup> [Q13](#)

<sup>19</sup> Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Grassroots Music Venues: Oral Evidence](#), 13 May 2025 and 2019-2024

Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Grassroots Music Venues](#) (Seventh Report of Session 2023-24), 11 May 2024

<sup>20</sup> Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Fan-led review of live music](#), launched 4 June 2025

<sup>21</sup> Comedysurvey.co.uk, [UK Live Comedy Sector Survey Report 2024](#), 6 February 2025, p2

<sup>22</sup> [Q14](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Q18](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Q41](#)



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warned us that comedy venues do not get even the limited funding and recognition that music venues do and are not currently in scope for the voluntary levy that is beginning to feed through to GMVs.<sup>25</sup>

We continue to be frustrated by the slow progress being made at implementing the voluntary levy for grassroots music venues. Given this, we do not believe now is the time for the Government to focus on expanding the focus of its efforts to include live comedy. **Nonetheless, we hope that the Government shares our view there is a strong case for the biggest venues, producers and promoters to voluntarily mirror the grassroots music levy across all forms of stadium and arena entertainment, including comedy.**

### Freelancers

93 per cent of comedians who responded to the 2024 Live Comedy Survey were sole traders, with the remaining proportion primarily working in groups or collectives.<sup>26</sup> As Dr Sharon Lockyer set out to the Committee, later echoed by Matt Forde and Kate Cheka, the industry and career development relies on comedians working for free to develop their skills, raise their profile and seek opportunities.<sup>27</sup> However, this ultimately creates barriers and entrenches inequalities that limits who can enter and succeed in the industry.

Successive CMS Committees have raised the plight of freelancers in the creative industry, calling for a Freelance Commissioner with powers and resources able to deal with the specific challenges they face.<sup>28</sup> In its response to the Committee's report into *British film and high-end TV*, the Government again rejected our proposal in favour of a Freelance Champion announced in the Creative Industries Sector Plan.<sup>29</sup>

In evidence on the Sector Plan, you set out the limited plans so far on the Freelance Champion, noting "we have to do a lot more work on precisely what this will look like and how we can make it effective and proportionate to the work that we need to do"<sup>30</sup> We will be following this work closely. **The need for a freelance champion is clear and urgent, and we expect DCMS to be working at pace to define and recruit an individual who can reflect the full scope of the creative industries, including live comedy.**

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<sup>25</sup> [Q12](#)

<sup>26</sup> Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Creative Industries Sector Plan: Oral Evidence](#), 8 July 2025, Q56

<sup>27</sup> [Q5](#), [Q41](#), [Q52](#)

<sup>28</sup> Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [British film and high-end television](#) (First Report of Session 2024–25), 10 April 2025, para 142 and 2019-2024 Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Creator remuneration](#) (Fifth Report of Session 2023-24), 10 April 2024, para 58.

<sup>29</sup> DCMS, [Creative Industries Sector Plan](#), 23 June 2025, p25

<sup>30</sup> CMS Committee, [Creative Industries Sector Plan](#), 8 July 2025, [Q56](#)



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### Standards

The live comedy industry places significant power in the hands of venues, promoters, programmers and bookers, and for new and emerging artists, in a network of more experienced performers. As with other parts of the creative industries, this creates gatekeepers and an imbalance of power that continues to put people at risk. As Jessica Toomey set out in 2023, women in comedy “must choose between refusing to work with sexist or abusive men and paying their rent”.<sup>31</sup>

Parts of the sector have acted, with the creation of *Get Off Live Comedy*<sup>32</sup> and the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority (CIISA) more broadly beginning its work with a focus on film and TV, music and theatre. **We welcome the Government’s continued commitment to CIISA, including in the Sector Plan and its response to our report into *British film and high-end TV*, and will continue to monitor the engagement of the creative industries with the work of CIISA.**

### Community comedy and social prescribing

80 per cent of comedy organisations that responded to the 2024 Live Comedy Survey raised money for charity or hosted charity shows, while 47 per cent of organisations offer volunteering opportunities.<sup>33</sup> But the social benefits of live comedy go far beyond this. Comedy has been brought into schools, hospitals and prisons, not just for entertainment but also to build confidence and esteem.<sup>34</sup> Lynne Parker’s Comedy in the Community work in the Medway area, funded by the local authority and Arts Council England “to build confidence, improve communication skills and engender leadership”.<sup>35</sup> Louisa Jackson, founder of Craic Health, is working to establish ‘Comedy on Prescription’ as a recognised form of social prescribing.<sup>36</sup>

The potential for live comedy to be part of a wider conversation about creative health adds to the need for its recognition of a distinct art form by policymakers. We plan to return to the issue of creative health in the coming months, to consider what more DCMS, the Department for Health and Social Care and other Government departments can do.

### Conclusion

From a single evidence session, we have identified the huge positive impact that live comedy can have, economically, culturally and socially. The challenge now is for the

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<sup>31</sup> The Guardian, [Female comedians say abuse is rife](#), 22 September 2023

<sup>32</sup> [Get Off Live Comedy](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Comedysurvey.co.uk, UK Live Comedy Sector Survey Report 2024](#), 6 February 2025, p 12

<sup>34</sup> [Q32](#)

<sup>35</sup> Funny Women, [Comedy in the Community](#), 2 February 2024

<sup>36</sup> <https://craic.health/>



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Government to build on this, recognising live comedy as a specific art form as a first step, and working with the sector to help deliver on the benefits they bring to our country. We look forward to your response on how you will be taking this forward.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caroline Dinenage".

**Dame Caroline Dinenage DBE MP**  
**Chair, CMS Committee**