

Written evidence submitted by New Old Friends Ltd

Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors

New Old Friends Ltd is a theatre company specialising in creating mid-scale comedy theatre that tours the UK to regional venues, a combination of theatres and larger art centres with capacities between 200-1,000 seats. It was established in 2008 and has earned a good reputation for creating quality work. It is particularly relevant to note the organisation is not subsidised either by the state (Arts Council or other) or outside private investment. The company has grown organically with each production making modest profits which have been re-invested into the company to create bigger shows with bigger budgets and, thankfully, bigger returns.

The immediate impact of Covid-19 was felt early in 2020.

We first notice advance sales being affected in early-February with venues reporting uncertainty about the virus in China as one of many potential factors.

By early March sales 'fell off a cliff' as uncertainty and fear spread.

We opened our show on 12th March and have four performances that week. We had rough 70-80% of ticket holders turn up.

The Prime Minister's announcement on the 16th advising the public against going to the theatre but not closing them put us in a hugely difficult position. UK Theatre stepped in and closed all its venues, effectively shutting our tour, but not all our venues are UK Theatre members and there was stress and uncertainty created by this vacuum of responsibility.

Ultimately we had to take the decision to cancel or postpone all the dates of our tour, allowing each venue to choose what was best for them. Some preferred to cancel outright and ask patrons to consider donating the ticket price, whereas others were keen to postpone the date and thus hang on to ticket revenue. New Old Friends has thus far received no advance on any ticket revenue or split of donations.

We have invested almost all our capital reserves into the creation of this show and presented it just four times. We have paid all our creative team in full and gave cast and crew (all freelance) four weeks of full pay, which is all the company can afford without income.

The lack of clear information about support offered (which is still lacking as it pertains to a company like us supporting its freelance workers) hugely increased the stress levels and also meant we had to take difficult financial decisions putting the welfare of those we employ above the potential survival of the business.

We are scheduled to tour again in the autumn, but who knows if we will be able to from a health & safety perspective or what the landscape of regional theatre will look like. Two of

our venues have already announced they are closing permanently/going into administration.

Then there is the matter of public confidence and demand for theatre, our existence and success was built solely on ticket sales. Our ability to sell those tickets will be sorely tested as we have no reserves to use for marketing for example.

DCMS will need to find an effective way to support regional venues, extending the rates holiday would be a good start but more will be needed, in order to give formerly thriving companies like ours somewhere to present our work. But it also needs to look at how it can support this middle-class, which is the lifeblood of the sector, directly. Loans are not good enough unless they are 100% interest free and non-repayable for the three-five years it might take to get projects moving and see workable returns on them.

The TTR scheme could be broadened for one year to take in all associated costs not just those covered currently.

A tangible support that would touch all levels of the theatre sector would be continued investment in public messaging post-crisis, and a campaign focussing on getting people out of their homes into theatre & performance spaces spending their money once again.

The boom in online/digital offerings is fabulous, but it should be used to augment a thriving live sector post-crisis.

I fear that the sector will be necessarily risk-averse post-crisis, which is not a recipe for great art. We have been touring new-writing with 'no-name' casts for over a decade and slowly built a foundation, and achieved some great goals, but without proper support linked to achievable targets it is highly possible work like ours will disappear in favour of more 'bankable' fare featuring recognisable faces or titles from the established cannon.