

Written evidence submitted by the Royal Court Theatre

<https://committees.parliament.uk/call-for-evidence/113/impact-of-covid19-on-dcms-sectors/>

- What has been the immediate impact of COVID-19 on the sector?

Immediate closure of the theatre for an indefinite period with suspension of 8 productions and a UK tour between March 17th and mid-August. Four income streams choked off: ticket income, catering income, commercial income from transferred / touring shows, and fundraising income. This amounts to a loss of around £2m over the 5 month lockdown / closure period. Only our core Arts Council grant remains stable. Our staff is around 120 people (a mix of permanent staff and casual ushers, bar staff and show crew). We have furloughed around 100, with 18 permanent staff remaining.

In addition, we work with around 370 freelance actors, stage managers, designers and directors every year and over 100 playwrights. These people are losing work with us - we have honoured / deferred all contracts and have cashflowed freelancers with expected contract payments through April and May. We have chosen to postpone all productions, rather than cancel, so we now have a slate of promises that pushes future work out / further ahead.

We have kept the play development and writers groups going and are contributing to BBC Bitesize Drama and project work with school kids online while in shutdown.

- How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

The "advice" to close theatres was late and unclear. It pushed the decision-making onto organisations and divided the sector in opinion and action. It was a very difficult period as audiences dwindled and sales flatlined towards inevitable closure. At the Court, we felt compelled to make the decision ourselves and issued a statement at 4.30 pm on March 16th as the PM was beginning his advisory speech about public gatherings. While the trade bodies spent the next 90 minutes interpreting and clarifying the advice, we had already spent the day talking to companies and staff and preparing for the building's closure. SOLT / UKT issued their "order" to close all theatres at 6.40pm, less than an hour before curtain up. We felt grateful that we had anticipated the need to close and not waited for government clarity.

The essential govt support has been the Job retention Scheme which has been critical to sustaining workers and steadying the operation whilst we scan the horizon to measure the length of closure and impacts.

ACE was quiet for the first few weeks of the crisis but then decisive and practical, responding to needs, advancing grants, waiving challenging criteria. In the fifth week of lockdown we will hear about their emergency grants to NPOs and which direction these grants will face: investing in our creative future, shoring up core staffing, or supporting our civic communities.

The Royal Court is one of the 14 London producing theatres which form London Theatre Consortium. The Exec Directors / Exec Producers of these 14 theatres have met twice weekly since March 9th. This network of support, questioning, answering, and aligning has been unbelievably valuable.

- What will the likely long-term impacts of COVID-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

Quite simply we do not know, but any scenario involves 12-18 months of sustained disruption and a new “low touch” context where the creation of theatre and public gatherings will need to operate under very different protocols. The 2020/21 financial and artistic year is simply wiped out. 2021/22 will be feeling the aftershocks. We produce around 20 plays a year to 120,000 audience members - how do we recover, reinvent and replenish?

Even after this time our financial modelling will have to look different – it won’t be a case of using 20/21 and 21/22 to rebuild to the place we were before as so many of our income streams will be affected if we want to stay true to our core mission of producing diverse work – competition for funds will be higher than ever.

We know that, conceptually, theatre will survive this rupture, and be essential to the capital's and the country's recovery - we know we will need the staff body we have now, and we know the artists will be there to create work. So what is the ethical approach to a 12-18 month rupture? Is it that all of our core costs are underpinned while we wait? Or is it ethically right that cultural businesses are closed and all staff made redundant, with resources repurposed towards essential services? To resume and rebuild when the threat has passed. Do we need to re-imagine an art form that is defined by public gathering and physical space into a digital one, and what risks come with that? This ethical clarity will need to come from the sector and the govt working together.

This is the year all arts organisations would be applying for another 4 years of ACE NPO funding so ACE will need to repurpose their vision to be clear and unambiguous about which organisations they want to see survive and sustain into the next portfolio round. How can ACE use this transition / application year radically and imaginatively in the context of COVID-19 as an opportunity to reposition the portfolio, and how cultural organisations function into a resilient future?

- What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with COVID-19?

Even within the London theatre community there are very diverse stake-holders - crudely, between the commercial sector and the community-based not-for-profit sector. This crisis has tested the differing priorities of these two groups, and DCMS may have been receiving conflicting asks, or only hearing from the loudest voices. Convening diverse stakeholders has been critical, and having key trusted representatives from the cultural industries on board to advise and share experience.

- How might the sector evolve after COVID-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

Do we mothball and prepare for restart? Do we innovate into the unknown? There are some key risks around the sector's innovations and evolutions through this period and we are treading carefully around them:

- that work diversifies online without a pricing / audience strategy and struggles to gain an economic balance, while also failing to rebuild a live audience who feel safe and inclined to gather
- that cultural organisations are under economic pressure to programme commercially / conservatively / classically and all of the incredible advances in innovative dynamic inclusive work over the past 5 years are demolished
- that marginalised voices and people of colour are pushed aside to prioritise a core, top-ticket price, theatre-going audience

Our theatre does not have the scale of cash resource to invest in generating new work or new technologies at this time. Most theatres will run dry of cash by September at the latest, many sooner than that. It feels unreasonable to expect arts organisations to innovate during this time, beyond a DIY level.

Possible pathways include:

- Partnership across theatres to share core resource and create new platforms
- Partnership with broadcasters and networks
- Digging into communities at a much more civic operational level to shore up social fragility and change
- Adjusting focus to lean more heavily into talent development, R&D and cultivating new voices
- Using the opportunity of being out of our London hubs to operate geographically, internationally and virtually

The Royal Court's strength is our unique writer development work - what in business would be classed as investment in R&D / pipeline. All of this work is new, and about the world now, from the finest minds - this relevance and newness will be essential to the art that the world

will be hungry to experience and consume. This development work continues and will shore up our place in the sector.

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16 April 2020