

Written evidence submitted by the Little Theatre Guild

Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

The Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain (LTG) is grateful for the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence.

Background

The LTG is the umbrella organisation for its 115 member theatres across the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. Each of our theatres is a local community asset, run entirely by amateurs, with seat capacities ranging from 48 to over 300. During the last year our member theatre's income was around £7.3m, playing to 638,496 audience members through 942 productions giving over 5,800 performances. All of our member theatres rely 100 percent on income from the sale of tickets and do not receive any Arts Council funding. Some of our theatres are available for outside lets, providing a much appreciated service to the communities they operate in. These are provided at very reasonable rates giving an outlet for local dance and stage schools who do not have an auditorium. This gives the children an opportunity to perform in a "proper" theatre which they find very exciting as do their parents. Some theatres exhibit local artist and photography clubs; some are used during the day as meeting places for community groups and many are used as a music venue for local and touring bands. Some host regular Comedy nights. The theatres provide a cultural hub in the communities they serve and in many areas they are the main source of cultural activity. Without access to our member theatre venues that provides mutual benefit to put on productions or provide artistic space many hundreds or even thousands of small amateur groups providing theatre, music, art, dance classes or WEA groups would not survive.

Less than 5 % of our theatres are Employers where the theatres are run and managed by a paid manager, however the remaining management and work is done by volunteers. The majority of our member theatres have been operating for a long time and manage to survive, despite a general decline in audience numbers. Not many will have the financial reserves that would last more than 6-9 months.

Our Website www.littletheatreguild.org will show you the range of theatres across the country.

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

During the week of 9 March 2020, the Prime Minister advised people not to visit pubs, cafes and theatres. In line with that advice, plus seeing what the professional theatres across the UK were doing, our member theatres closed their doors for the safety of both their patrons but also the volunteers who run the theatre. The following week on Monday 16th March, the Prime Minister announced the closure of all pubs, cafes and theatres. Our member theatres closed their doors during the week of 9 March. Income has dried up and refunds for cancelled productions have been requested. Although some of our audience patrons have donated the cost of their tickets to the theatre.

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

During the week of 16 March the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced support for those small business that had to close through no fault of their own, including a grant of £10k being available to those businesses. Guidance provided by the Treasury enabled the majority of our theatre members to obtain grants from the Retail Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund of £10k, (or the Small Business Relief Grants Fund) with some being eligible for the £25k grant. Many of our suppliers, for example performing rights holders have granted extensions and free cancellations of licences, some landlords have granted 3 month freeze on lease payments, Music rights holders have offered a freeze on music licences. The majority of our members pay rates and are taking advantage of the rates freeze. These measures have given our member theatres much needed short-term financial breathing space.

None of our member theatres receive any financial support from The Arts Council.

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

Our main concern is the timescale for easing the lockdown including what social distancing measures will be needed once the lockdown has been eased. We need to understand the likely phasing of any easement, but we are expecting to be one of the last sectors to have the lockdown eased and that gives us grave concern over our members long-term finances, especially those that do not own their own theatre premises.

If social distancing measures are initially kept as at present, we would not be able to rehearse our productions. Similarly if our auditoria would have to reduce by say 50% to ensure social distancing, large numbers of our member theatres need in excess of 70% box office returns to break even, thus delaying the time when their finances return to normal.

We are concerned that many of our senior volunteers and audience members may be reluctant to attend the theatres even when restrictions are removed. This will seriously impact our member theatre's ability to operate and may force some to close. We will need government reassurance to the public that it is safe for the elderly to go to the theatre.

Further government financial support may well be needed to ensure our member theatres do not fail as a result of Covid-19 outbreak, through no fault of their own.

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

Whilst the speed of the Covid-19 infection was unprecedented we believe that HMG has been good at announcing the assistance available, our concerns are around the provision of detail of who was eligible and how to access such assistance. The ability to speak with DCMS senior officials has been most welcome and we would hope that such virtual meetings will continue to provide clarity on the easing of lockdown procedures and any further assistance provided by DCMS.

We would ask DCMS to encourage arms-length providers to remain flexible in assisting our member theatres financially until such time as we are 100% operational.

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

As stated earlier, our expectation is that venues such as theatres are likely to be at the tail end of easing of restrictions, with social distancing remaining a key component during the early stages. This

will make it difficult to rehearse and may lead to further delays to re-opening theatres, thus compounding the financial pressure on our theatre members.

The amateur theatre sector is a vital component of local artistic endeavour and social cohesion especially bringing in the youth to our theatres. They are considered a local community asset of value. Therefore we need continued support to ensure that the communities we serve are able to retain those social links, especially in socially deprived areas where our theatres operate.

Conclusion:

The LTG member theatres are not operating at present, but are grateful to DCMS and Treasury for the assistance given to ease the financial pressures during the Covid-19 lockdown. Our main concerns now are about the timescale of the easement and social distancing measures that may be required that could extend the time when our theatres are able to reopen, which will in turn create further financial pressure on our member theatres, the vast majority have only limited financial reserves. We are also concerned about how soon our volunteers will be prepared to return, especially our more elderly and vulnerable volunteers. This again could cause the closure of some of our theatres, who are operating and accepted as assets of local community value, through providing venues for youth activities, other amateur theatre groups, art, music, and dance classes.

We again thank DCMS for the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence. Should you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact us.