

Written evidence submitted by Park Theatre

We are submitting evidence on behalf of Park Theatre, a mid-size North London venue based in Finsbury Park. We are a non-government subsidised charity presenting a combination of received work from commercial and subsidised producing companies, and in-house productions. We operate a Cafe Bar that is open from early in the morning to late at night, and also run a range of creative learning activities for both young people and adults. We aim to be as accessible as possible to all members of our community, which includes running a programme of accessible performances, including captioned, audio described, relaxed, dementia friendly and parent and baby. We opened our doors in May 2013.

The immediate impact of COVID-19 on the arts sector has been enormous. For those organisations like ours who are not subsidised by the government (and even for many who are) ticket income is a huge part of our turnover, and that has been removed in its entirety overnight. Organisations with small reserves have immediately faced hugely challenging decisions around how best to deal with their staff teams and other significant monthly running costs, and are faced with an impossible planning scenario when our venues are closed for an unspecified period of time.

Much of the support from government and arms-lengths bodies such as the Arts Council has been swift and hugely welcomed. The Job Retention scheme has been a life line for many organisations who otherwise would have had no choice but to make a large number of staff redundant. One real challenge of the scheme for our sector is the inability of furloughed staff to undertake any work for the organisation at all. The majority of furloughed staff in the arts sector want to work, and it would arguably be better for their mental health if they were allowed to do so on a voluntary basis. The decisions made to furlough staff for our sector tend to be based around whether they are essential to the business at this moment in time. Whilst there are many staff that fall into the category of non-essential, there is certainly longer term work that they could be engaging with that would support the re-opening of our cultural buildings as and when this becomes possible. Denying them the opportunity to do this supports neither the staff themselves nor the sector as a whole when the time comes to reopen. The Arts Council's launch of their Emergency Funds have also been hugely welcomed, although we are aware that this is likely to have longer term impacts down the line in terms of what funds they have available for more ongoing support for the sector. The government backed Loan Scheme has not been the right option for many of us, as it is challenging on the business models that many of us work on to envisage how such a loan would be possible to pay back.

We are all unsure of the long term impact of COVID-19 on our sector, but they are likely to be significant. It will be vital that audiences feel confident returning to live events, in particular the over 70s who are a vulnerable group and traditionally make up a significant portion of many audiences. Whilst not all arts venues and organisations are in the same position, our feeling is that it would be catastrophic to reopen and then have to close again due to a second wave, and that we would be better off waiting longer to reopen than to risk this. Similarly, the idea of reopening with social distancing still in place seems almost impossible to implement and also to make work financially for many venues. Our sector bodies have already begun to think about a widespread campaign to encourage audiences back when we're able to reopen, and handling this well will be essential to trying to return audience numbers to reasonable levels in a reasonable time frame. Our sector is also not one who can simply return to normal operations immediately after social distancing measures are relaxed – most venues will need a good two or three months to prepare before they are able to

start generating income through ticket sales again. It will be vital that the government recognises this and provides support to the sector during this period. It will also be essential to recognise that there will be a long term impact on fundraising to our sector. Many organisations, including us, have gone to our donors for their support – in our case, a large number of generous donations from individuals has made the difference between us having to close and being able to stay open and attempt to weather the storm. However, whilst we are hugely grateful for this generosity in the short term, we know that we cannot return to those donors to ask for more any time soon, and that with the country likely to enter into a significant recession, attracting support from new donors and funders is only going to get harder. The government needs to recognise this and support this sector throughout this period, when there are many urgent calls on public money.

Jez Bond & Rachael Williams
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