

Written evidence submitted by Crying Out Loud

Submission of evidence to the DCMS Committee on the enquiry “Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

About Crying Out Loud

Crying Out Loud (COL) was founded in 2002 by producer-curator Rachel Clare, supported by a Promoters Award from Arts Council England. The company has evolved over the years, but maintains an aesthetic of memorable, extraordinary and visual work that crosses art-form boundaries.

Since its inception, COL has toured productions, created development opportunities for artists, curated seasons and festivals, founded networks and developed one-off special events.

COL is known for introducing seminal international artists to the UK, including French artists James Thierrée, CirkVOST, and Company Non Nova; Groupe Acrobatique de Tanger from Morocco; Italy’s Company TPO; Race Horse Company from Finland; Laika and Inne Goris from Belgium. Homegrown success includes the support and development of British based circus companies Niki & JD and Pirates of the Carabina with their hit show, Flown.

Other activities include curating family events for Manchester International Festival; the first circus season at London’s Roundhouse in 2007; Freetime at Somerset House from 2000 to 2008; Piccadilly Circus Circus a huge site specific event which formed part of the Cultural Olympiad in 2012; and Circus Sampler, two free weekends of circus, music and hip hop at Somerset House as part of the 250th anniversary of the creation of the first ‘modern’ circus in 2018.

COL is a founder-member of active networks including: the UK wide strategic touring partnership: Circus Evolution, the international street and circus network Circostrada, and the pan-European CircusNext (previously Jeunes Talents Cirque Europe).

The development of the contemporary circus scene has always been integral to COL’s work. Recently, COL teamed up with NoFit State Circus to deliver Spotlight UK Circus – a showcase that aimed to raise the profile of UK contemporary circus on the international scene.

The company is supported as a National Portfolio Organisation by Arts Council England (of just over £200k), and is based at Somerset House with a small core team of three and an expanding pool of regularly collaborating freelancers. Our annual turnover varies from year to year usually between £500k - £1 million.

The very immediate impact on COL’s activities from COVID-19

- The immediate cessation of all our activities, national and international, in creating and rehearsing new performances, resulting in a loss of all performance ready work.

- The immediate cancellation of all future performances, national and international, for the next six months and other scheduled performances being put on hold.
- The struggle of how to continue international partnerships and collaborations in Africa and Europe.
- The struggle to be active in the sector as a small organisation when our experienced artistic director, unfortunately, caught COVID-19 and still suffers from its impact on her health.

The subsequent challenges we face due to the impact of Covid-19 on our work

The work of producing companies is based on collaborative work with both artists and presenting organisations. We currently face many of the same challenges facing all arts/culture organisations in responding to Covid-19. These include:

- How to manage the sudden and continuing loss of income due to cessation of work.
- How to cover the additional costs of presenting work and re-opening of venues and other performance spaces (when possible) in relation to social distancing, additional hygiene and travel restrictions.
- How to plan when decisions need to be made in advance and yet there is uncertainty about likely future regulations.
- How to plan work across borders with uncertain and changing travel options and quarantine restrictions.
- How to produce, create and present safely when social distancing is not possible.
- How to encourage both artists and audiences to re-enter the world of live performance and assure them that it is sufficiently 'safe' to do so.

The following are more detailed challenges facing us and other organisations working with artists and activities that includes circus, they are challenges described from the circus sector's perspective, a sector without an overarching development body championing its needs.

Artists' training requirements

- Circus is fundamentally a physical, kinaesthetic form –training online is a poor substitute and its use is limited when it is the only method available.
- There is a need for constant training and maintenance of skills by the sector workforce (extended periods of break are damaging to skillsets)
- There is a complexity and expense of returning to training for circus artists in a world where specialist equipment and/or group work is critical to the training requirements.

Workforce and work creation

- Circus creation and its touring ecology are both national and international and thrive without borders - regional isolation and travel restrictions severely reduces opportunities for artists to train, work and create.
- There are challenges with securing insurance for what was already seen as a high risk activity.
- Recent graduates and newly freelance artists are particularly vulnerable and may decide not to pursue an already financially precarious and physically high-risk career. This is of particular concern around supporting talented individuals from vulnerable groups and marginalized communities.

- Due to the ‘mixed and international economies’ relevant to many circus organisations and circus artists, together with the frequent practice of last-minute short-term contracts, sometimes the national ‘safety net’ programmes put in place are not appropriate or available.
- Some fragile organisations are not honouring existing contracts or delaying the payment of fees already owed as they do not have the cash. Artists are dependent on a small number of sector employers who are also unstable and at risk.

Sector support, touring, festivals, venues and audiences

- The loss of summer activities at short notice has been particularly difficult. Outdoor and tent performances are a substantial part of the sector ecology.
- The programming of circus in theatre venues across the UK has been growing over the last decade, but only a few prioritise circus. At a time where venues will struggle to re-open and may need to programme more low risk work to rebuild stability and reduce their programmes of higher-risk work, circus programming may get squeezed out. As circus creators receive less subsidy than other art forms, the support of venues is critical to its survival in theatres and, without regular programming, circus in theatres is at risk losing its connection and profile with existing audiences.
- The limited unrestricted arts funding support (there is a relatively low number of Arts Council funded National Portfolio Organisations with a circus focus), means that there is a high dependence of every area of the sector ecology on commercial income for survival.
- New project support through raised income (public and private), can be another critical factor for the survival of small circus companies. This may be in short supply in the near future and circus may lose out to larger scale organisations and the priorities given to other art forms in crisis.
- Circus does not have specific sector support at the Arts Council (such as theatre, dance, music, visual arts), making it difficult to ensure that the sector is understood, supported and championed strategically at the national level.

How we and the circus sector may survive and thrive post COVID-19

COL and many in the circus sector are known for being resilient and would like to make the most of current circumstances. We see the following as opportunities, even in difficult times for the live performance sector:

- Circus is a popular and adaptable art form with a flexible ecology of relatively small organisations and independent artists.
- Circus can offer audiences a high-quality, often non-verbal and highly visual creative experience; it is able to bridge a number of spaces and contexts and can maximize on opportunities to move into outdoor spaces where audience concerns about mass assembly can be mitigated.
- There are existing works that have not had extended touring that could be quickly re-developed/ re-toured.
- The circus sector is experienced in taking an entrepreneurial approach to every circumstance.
- Circus is currently maximizing its use of online teaching, streaming, virtual community engagement and virtual development of future creation and presenting planning despite minimal resources. This learning will support its future ways of working.

What we and the wider circus sector need from policy makers and public funders:

1. Ongoing consultation and engagement with a representative range of companies and organisations to ensure that the needs of the entire sector continue to be heard within ongoing policy development, emergency support planning and the development of future focused solutions.
2. An assurance that public support mechanisms are inclusive of the circus sector and are adaptable to our requirements – specifically a recognition that the circus sector (commercial as well as subsidised) will need support for as long as social distancing is necessary. Support to include:
 - a. Ongoing support for freelance artists – particularly those not eligible for support through SEISS;
 - b. VAT on ticket sales to be reduced to 5%;
 - c. A new ‘guarantee against loss scheme’ to enable presenters and producers to manage the risk of COVID 19 related loss of earnings caused by business interruption;
 - d. A guarantee that international artists who are unable to return home can access public funds on the same basis as UK residents for the duration of a future crisis;
 - e. A new designated fund for local authorities to ensure that the costs of Big Top and open-air circus performances and festivals are not passed on to producing and presenting companies and organisers;
 - f. The creation of a new investment fund to support both content creation and adaptation and the development of new business models to ensure future sectoral sustainability;
 - g. Continuation of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme until the sector (including outdoor and indoor venues, training facilities and schools) are allowed and practically able to reopen;
3. An assurance that any resources made available through the Arts Councils are shared strategically across the arts ecology and that less visible art forms, such as circus, do not lose out accidentally.
4. A continued dialogue with the sector to ensure that there are avenues to support the entire Circus sector – recognising that there is no current overarching circus development body.

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