

# Written evidence submitted by Upswing Aerial

## DCMS Consultation – Impact of Covid-19

### Upswing - Who We Are

Upswing tells new stories in extraordinary ways. Upswing is a contemporary circus company – using the visceral, thrilling and high-risk skills of the circus artist to make powerful work with narrative drive – creating participatory projects and performance that touches audiences with powerful stories and important social conscious.

Upswing is a creative company – a content provider collaborating with partners, venues and promoters to create touring shows, site specific performances, workshops and engagement activities that are led by our singular voice and our artistic ambition. Upswing is an artist-led/founder-led organisation (Artistic Director Vicki Amedume).

Upswing is a BAME-led organisation – with a long-held and long-delivered commitment to developing, mentoring and presenting both emerging and mid-career artists with a focus on those under-represented in the arts particularly other BAME and disabled artists.

Upswing is also a National Portfolio Organisation of Arts Council England (ACE) – one of a small handful of BAME-led and Artist-led companies, many of which are in Band 1 (the lowest funding band) and so are highly dependent on commercial and earned income opportunities for survival.

### What do we mean by ‘Circus’

‘Circus’ is a popular, adaptable and historic art form with a flexible ecology that takes in everything from the traditional, big top, touring, commercial circus to the festivals and promoters who work in the public sphere and with subsidy to the artists and smaller organisations like Upswing. Circus also includes the development and training of artists including two HE-accredited circus schools alongside other training/learning opportunities.

Upswing works in different contexts with a mixed funding model – inside theatres, outside festivals and other site-specific events. Our income is a mixed of earned income from ticket sales, teaching and training, fees from public and commercial events, statutory funding from ACE and increasingly, grants from trusts and foundations.

### The Circus Sector’s Response and Upswing’s Response

Evidence has already been submitted to the Select Committee summarising the experiences of the traditional, commercial circus (Association of Circus Proprietors, Zippo’s Circus) as well as the wider Circus sector (from a consortium including representatives from education, touring companies, venues, producers and creation spaces). This evidence highlights the sector-specific challenges in light of the Covid-19 pandemic – challenges for funding models including private finance and public funding, licensing, insurance and training/rehearsal for our artists.

With the evidence presented here – UPSWING wishes to highlight issues that are particular to our specific circumstances – as a non-venue based, artist-led, creative content-maker; as an organisation struggling with its mixed economy; as a BAME-led organisation; and as a mentor of both emerging and mid-career, often BAME, artists in Circus.

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

Over the last several years, UPSWING has worked very hard to diversify its income with ACE NPO income falling from 60% of company income in 2013-2014 to just 38% in 2019-2020. This diversification has been made possible through the extension of all of the following funding sources –

all of which were immediately and significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic to a nearly disastrous extent:

**Upswing’s Mixed Income Economy Suffering the Impact of Covid-19:**

- International exploitation of the company’s existing assets – **loss of all international touring dates:**
- Exploitation of the company’s existing assets – **loss of UK/EU touring and project partnerships**
- Development of multi-year **community engagement programmes - programmes halted due to venue closures and social distancing.**
- Development of **Consultation Opportunities and Co-productions - programmes halted due to venue closures and social distancing.**
- Development of **Co-Commissioners for future projects - Partners currently unable to honour commitments due to their own income losses**
- Increased the offer of **Public workshop/classes - - programmes halted due to venue closures and social distancing.**

We are now facing cessation of almost all income generating activity & delay of projects for our foreseeable future. It will result in loss of employment opportunities for **freelance artists** (in 2019-2020 Upswing employed 50 individual artists across 148 separate contracts) and well as the loss of performance and development opportunities for emerging BAME artists and companies. Upswing plays a significant role in Circus particularly as a mentor and employer for circus artists. As a BAME-led organisation we are particularly committed to developing the careers of BAME artists.

Financially, the loss of this activity which subsidises our core costs leaves our overall organisation at significant financial risk. Upswing losses in this period include:

- 25 total weeks work for performers/crew for Bedtime Stories tour in China;
- 54 total days’ work for performers/crew for Catch Me in UK/EU;
- 30 total days’ work for Circus Flavours & other workshop events at outdoor festivals/events;
- 18 total weeks work for the Seasons Library Tour.
- 20 weeks lost in consultation projects at New Vic and Bristol Old Vic Theatres.
- 16 weeks lost work in community engagement projects.

**For Upswing, these losses to the company over this period are close to £115,000 in net income – approximately 40% of our annual income.**

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

From our perspective, support offered to date has strongly reflected the needs of large organisations – primarily venues and not artist-led/content providers like Upswing . While these large organisations are an important backbone of the arts ecology – it is critical that the needs of all organisations are met. As you can see here – the current support has had limited impact on our situation (NB we are still awaiting a decision on our application to ACE NPO Emergency Funds).

<b>Support Provided</b>	<b>Specific impact on Upswing/Upswing’s</b>
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	<b>Colleagues and Partners</b>
Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)	<i>Upswing only has 2.6 FTE positions – difficult to maintain the company if all positions are put on ‘furlough’; also not able to furlough our freelance team.</i>
Local Government Funds	<i>Upswing was eligible for a Tower Hamlets grant which was significant.</i>
ACE Emergency Funds – Individuals	<i>We were able to support some circus artists to enable them to submit applications for support; however, <b>many artists were ineligible to apply due to the portfolio nature of their employment.</b> Circus artists were also pushed onto other funding schemes (Equity, Help Musicians, etc) which made significantly smaller grants than the £2500 offered by ACE.</i>
ACE Emergency Funds – non NPO organisations	<i>Upswing was able to mentor small, partner organisations through their application process;</i>
Self-Employment Income Support System	<i><b>Most circus artists not eligible</b> – due to their mixed employment status (many had PAYE jobs in hospitality sector) or minimal profit position</i>
ACE Emergency Funds – NPO	<i>Upswing applied for this fund but parameters of grant are only to support organisations stay afloat until 30th September 2020. Any organisations able to stay afloat until this date were ineligible. For content producers like Upswing this does not address the serious financial challenges we will face in the last two quarters of the year.</i>

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

**Negative Impacts:**

- **Imbalance in recovery across the culture sector** – focus has been heavily on **venues** with **limited focus on the needs of the artist-led and producing organisation**. Without a specific recovery package we face a constriction in our ability to tour due to reduced programming ability and fees from Venues – undermining the entire creation and touring ecology.
- **We will be unable to invest in new work**. Artists rely on partnerships with venues to commission new work; unlikely that venues will have any **‘commissioning’ funds** until 2022. Leaving us at risk of having no new future ‘products’ to earn income from.
- Huge **risk to employment** throughout the sector. If the CJRS scheme expires before venues, festivals and other performance spaces are able to re-start their activities– there will be widespread redundancies. Unclear how the sector would be able to re-start quickly if so many employees needed replacing.

- The majority of workers in Circus are freelance, this is in larger proportions than theatre and dance due to the lack of organisations able to offer PAYE contracts. They form the backbone of our industry. The limited number of employers in the sector have themselves been made hugely precarious. A study from Circus Futures has revealed 40% of the freelance workforce in Circus are considering leaving the industry.
- BAME artists are particularly at risk. BAME artists tend to receive lower levels of funding than their non BAME counterparts and tend to be under-employed in the Arts sector generally. The inevitable reduction in opportunities throughout the recovery will lead to focus on safe and inexpensive work. This poses a huge risk for BAME artists and companies as we are often seen as a 'niche' offer. Upswing has the double bind that Circus, even with its huge audience appeal can be seen as difficult to stage for many venues.

### Positive Impacts:

- Innovation in developing work for **digital sphere**. The period of lockdown has afforded companies, like Upswing, the opportunity to significantly interrogate the use of digital technology in the development of our work and to have creative space to experiment with digital delivery.
- Innovation in **understanding of audiences**. Delivery of digital work – including 'conversation' events as well as performances – has widely expanded the opportunities for wide, international audience engagement. However, artists are still struggling to identify ways to monetise digital work – especially given the overwhelming amount of content available online.

### Support needed

- Arts Sector-specific extension of the CJRS – at least long enough to cover the transition out of any period in which venues are still ordered to close by the government.
- A Production Development/Investment Fund – specifically available to artist-led / content-making arts organisations (**including NPOs**) – to underwrite the commissioning of new work (replacing funds previously provided by venues) and adaptation/development of business models to ensure future sectoral sustainability;
- 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;
- Early re-introduction of Lottery Project Grants to support small non-NPO touring companies.
- Additional support for freelance artists – especially those not supported through SEISS.
- Training/Re-training fund for artists working in high-risk art-forms (circus/dance/etc) to be able to safely return to work after extended periods away from training.
- Specific development funds for companies like Upswing who provide significant sector support and development opportunities to BAME artists, in particular to support and advance the careers of the many BAME circus artists we have worked with over the last five years.

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

- Recognition of **the breadth of the arts ecology** must be a priority going forward– and a recognition that all organisations (commercial/subsidised; venues/artists) have organisational/institutional needs that must be addressed so that the entire sector can move forward holistically.
- Need to ensure widest possible **participation** from across the arts sector in public responses and 'official' working groups -- from the beginning of the 'crisis' – artist-led organisations as well as venues; high-profile organisations/leaders as well as lesser-known figures. Widening the pool of participants from the start will ensure wider engagement across the sector and suggested

approaches that will support more effectively the whole arts ecology, in particular ensuring minority artists and minority-led organisations are included.

- Importance of not allowing a ***bounded 'short-term' approach to the crisis***. The focus of funding for NPO Emergency Funds only on sustaining until 30th September – necessarily excluded the needs of many smaller, content makers whose economies are integrated to a degree that even though they might not immediately fold, loss of activity in the May-September period will have catastrophic fallout in later quarters.
- Ensuring that '***recovery is always part of any 'emergency funds'***'. Unlike the options available to NPO's, funds for Non-NPOs recognised the need for funding for projects being delivered across the financial year in response to the crisis. Other national bodies for example, Arts Council Wales, enabled organisations to include recovery and re-set funds as an essential part of emergency relief.
- Recognise and protect ***the importance of Project Grants***. The outright elimination of Project Grants with the launch of the ACE Emergency Funds was a significant blow to large numbers of artists and content-makers just at the point they most needed support. This decision will have had a disproportionate impact on BAME-led organisations.

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

### **How the Culture Sector Might Evolve?**

- Re-Setting the Arts Ecology: Finding a new working balance between venues and content makers. All organisations are key to the arts moving forward.
- Adaptability and scalability of work. Organisations need to be prepared to adapt their work to circumstances which might change at short notice.
- Protect the stability of the freelance workforce going forward. Consider offering PAYE contracts for all artists.
- Digital Engagement – Integrate digital into all projects from start of creation – in an 'artistic' as well as 'documentation/archive'.
- International opportunities – investigate new ways of international engagement without physical touring (e.g. franchising; digital performance).
- Specifically, within the Circus Art-form, it would be useful to have a recognised coordinating body or development agency; one that could advocate on behalf of the entire circus sector.

### **Suggested DCMS Support for These Innovations**

- Support **international initiatives** with the EU and beyond; encourage the incorporation of culture as part of diplomatic initiatives; provide resources and systems to assist with areas like insurance, visa's;
- Fund initiatives of existing, smaller arts organisations to directly support the **training/development of artists** – particularly Black/Brown/Disabled artists.
- Offer expertise and funds to develop **digital initiatives**.
- Create an Investment Fund for artists-led organisations in order to support the making of new work going forward (and to replace venue commissioning funds which won't exist for the next 2-5 years).
- Funding needs to ensure that venues and content providers work together in future **cultural place-making initiatives**.

- Ensure that all size/sectors/art-forms and venues/content-makers are part of any internal/external public/informal discussions going forward so that the entire ecology is represented 'at the table'.
- Designate lead 'Circus' representatives within ACE and culture sectors.