

Written evidence submitted by ATC, Boundless, China Plate, English Touring Theatre, Frantic Assembly, Fuel, Graeae, Improbable, Out of Joint, Paines Plough, Pentabus, Talawa, Tamasha Theatre Company, Wise Children and Yellow Earth Theatre, Hightide

DCMS Select Committee Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors

Submitted: 19 June 2020

1. About Us

Evidence is compiled by members representing 16 producing and touring companies: ATC, Boundless, China Plate, English Touring Theatre, Frantic Assembly, Fuel, Graeae, Improbable, Out of Joint, Paines Plough, Pentabus, Talawa, Tamasha Theatre Company, Wise Children and Yellow Earth Theatre, Hightide.

2. Why we are submitting evidence

- 2.1. Much of the sector's initial focus has, rightly, been on venues and individuals in the arts sector, but we have found that we face our own particular challenges as non-building based organisations and want to add to the evidence given by SOLT, UKTheatre and other arts representatives.
- 2.2. In the greater theatrical ecosystem, touring companies are often the lynchpin connecting venues, independent artists and companies, and as such are needing different support mechanisms to survive during COVID and beyond. Touring companies will be essential to any recovery plan- for example, we were able to initiate the [Freelance Task Force](#).

3. Headlines

- 3.1. Problems for theatre and other live events will last until there is a safe and widely administered vaccine for COVID-19, and support needs to last that long too. There can be no recovery for the sector while people are not allowed or afraid to gather in groups.
- 3.2. Touring companies are at various states of emergency depending on what stage in their tour(s) (planning, rehearsing, touring) they were. There is a growing anxiety for organisations that couldn't demonstrate insolvency to ACE by September about what support will be available when they hit a crisis point later in the year.
- 3.3. Without a commitment from government to supporting the sector for as long as C19 remains a threat, the long term impacts affect every part of the ecology: theatres will close; employees will lose their jobs; freelancers will be unable to find work; contracting businesses (in marketing, design, technical hire, training etc etc) will fold. With these organisations will go the ecosystems they sit within: community groups, youth theatres, work in schools, professional development - the list goes on.

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

“Swift, far reaching and devastating.”

- 4.1. **Loss of (income-generating) activity**

- 4.1.1. All touring plans for the year have been cancelled with no notice, losing most if not all earned income for the year (ranging from £80,000 to over £1,000,000 per organisation).
- 4.1.2. Any participatory work has had to be postponed or rescheduled.
- 4.1.3. Non-NPO/unsupported companies and artists become the most vulnerable, with many unsupported by the furlough scheme/SEISS which makes this part of the sector especially vulnerable in the medium term.

4.2. Reduced teams and threat of job losses

- 4.2.1. Large numbers of staff are furloughed and/or facing redundancy, over 50% in the majority of our organisations.
- 4.2.2. Very rapid change to team sizes and working patterns (to cope with childcare/home-schooling/personal health care whilst shielding/isolation) has put a strain on those not furloughed, causing a discernible impact on mental health and wellbeing.
- 4.2.3. Video calling platforms not always accessible for D/deaf and disabled workers and Access to Work is not available for anyone on furlough.
- 4.2.4. Significant reduction in number of freelancers we are able to employ. With many organisations due to employ between 100 - 300 freelancers this year, this will have a significant impact on the wider sector.

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

“We are in desperate need for an intervention in the live entertainment sector.”

5.1. Inconsistent access to funding/support streams

- 5.1.1. Many support schemes and grants have been targeted at venues and organisations owning premises, leaving those who rent out of the picture.
- 5.1.2. Most touring organisations have been deemed ineligible for ACE Emergency funds.
- 5.1.3. The closure of ACE project grants means we can't access funding to adapt our touring work or create new work for other settings. Many smaller NPOs rely on 3rd party ACE grants in partnerships to create work.
- 5.1.4. Some touring organisations have been able to secure local authority emergency support, but many others have not.

5.2. Job Retention Scheme

- 5.2.1. There has been significant uptake of the Job Retention Scheme across most touring companies, but smaller organisations have been unable to use it without affecting strategic responses and planning which needs to be considered in future support packages.
- 5.2.2. JRS has been beneficial in managing the immediate crisis, however, the change of rules and eligibility at the end of May at very short notice meant some had to alter plans at very short notice and will result in organisations securing less support from JRS than initially anticipated.
- 5.2.3. The announcement that JRS will end in October creates a very significant challenge for organisations reliant on it to keep staff employed whilst theatres are closed – the decision to stop it will lead to redundancies.

5.3. SEISS

- 5.3.1. There should have been more and timelier support for self-employed people.

- 5.3.2. Between 25-50% of self-employed theatre workers are ineligible for SEISS, depending on their role.

5.4. Arts Council

- 5.4.1. ACE response was helpfully fast and offered a lifeline to individuals and organisations (mostly venues) in the short term.
- 5.4.2. Longer term support is essential, and clarity needed soon for planning to commence as we face the potential of another 12 months (min) of lockdown for venues.
- 5.4.3. Growing anxiety for organisations that couldn't demonstrate insolvency by September, about what support will be available when they hit a crisis point later in the year.

5.5. Access to Information

- 5.5.1. Lack of accessible available resources from DCMS and the government has meant Deaf and disabled artists have been unable to access valuable information; there have been no easy-read documents, BSL summaries or screen-reader friendly versions etc.

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

“Any support package should include recovery and guaranteed commitment of future funding, otherwise the risk will continue regardless.”

6.1. Redundancies and Closures

- 6.1.1. The first big wave of redundancies will come when furlough ends and closures will come soon (2-3 months) after if there is no further support for the industry.
- 6.1.2. We are in danger of losing a highly skilled workforce to other (often lower skilled) jobs.
- 6.1.3. We believe a sector specific approach, including extension of JRS and SEISS, is urgently needed.

6.2. Future Programming

- 6.2.1. Touring companies are ideally placed to react quickly at the point of reopening and can be a vital part of any recovery plan, with many venues looking to us to provide work for audiences. However, without added investment very few companies will have any resources left to mount work this financial year.
- 6.2.2. We anticipate that there will be an emphasis on 'safe' programming (known titles etc), which will adversely affect companies who tour new, experimental or challenging work. This will affect artists and organisations from less privileged backgrounds more than anyone else: there is a real danger that existing inequalities will be reinforced. Deaf and disabled-led and other minority-led organisations are also in fear of being left out and no longer programmed due to being seen as the most 'risky' work. There is a real possibility that touring work will become white, non-disabled and affluent.
- 6.2.3. We will need financial models that rely less on venues as commissioning and co-producing partners as venues will have fewer resources. Existing financial models of co-producing may no longer work. One solution is a restart fund for producing and touring companies who can offer shows to venues at lower financial risk.

6.2.4. As we emerge from Covid-19 touring companies will inevitably take on a lot of additional financial risk and pastoral responsibility when making new work and moving people around the country. Planning tours as venues re-open will be unpredictable and high-risk. We will need flexibility in grants requirements around timelines and changes to tour plans.

6.3. Digital Work

6.3.1. Free online content (often affordable for larger organisations) is making it harder to monetise work, particularly for smaller companies.

6.3.2. Not all digital work is accessible for Deaf and disabled audience, neuro-diverse people and lower income families. This creates a bigger divide on who can access arts and culture.

6.4. Connecting with Communities

6.4.1. We anticipate that the audiences that return when venues reopen will be the traditional arts audiences. The harder to reach members of the community including more diverse audiences, who the sector have been working hard to engage with over the past few years will not return without continued and increased engagement. Therefore, we are in vital need of investment in engagement and participation work to continue to support access and diversity in our audiences.

6.5. Live Performances

6.5.1. There are no guidelines around making performances safe again, for companies or audiences: huge uncertainty and lack of confidence in this area.

6.5.2. Artists with health issues will continue to be shielding, and many fear they will be forgotten. There will need to be additional support for these artists while shielding including research and development grants and funding to create new work.

6.5.3. Without a vaccine or quick, easy and cheap test for COVID19 there will need to be more robust understudy plans which cost more money. To date smaller organisations have not been able to afford understudies at all, therefore if a performer or production team member develops Covid-19 symptoms the whole tour would be jeopardised.

6.6. Finances

6.6.1. Financial support is the most pressing need: calls for the extension of the JRS and the SEISS, additions to Theatre Tax Relief (such as eligibility for digital productions and production running costs) and a significant package of financial support as a restart fund are urgent and essential.

6.6.2. Many funding streams we might turn to have repurposed. Some Trusts and Foundations have responded quickly but are only supporting current grant holders and not new applicants. Joined up conversations with major trusts and foundations will be needed.

6.6.3. When ineligible for any of the above, there is a heavy reliance on individual donations which has been historically difficult to achieve for non-building based organisations. In this climate it is especially difficult with no new work being created.

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

“The short term response was just that, short term.”

7.1. The theatre ecology is far greater than the buildings

- 7.1.1. There is the need to look at the interconnectedness of the sector and not prioritise one side as it will prove insufficient to keep the sector alive and thriving. Initial funding has focused largely on venues at threat of closure and its vital any future support doesn't neglect other parts of the sector (such as small/medium sized orgs and independent artists) that are vital to the success of the arts ecology as a whole. A lesson for the future might be that in order to have a diverse rich arts ecology the big trees (as in venues & buildings) don't survive without the small fragile flowers (independent artists) and the bees that pollinate (touring companies).
- 7.1.2. The discourse has focused too heavily on commercial theatre so far: the voices and views of smaller players aren't being heard and we are being driven ever further down a path toward increasing commercialisation, which, we might argue, is what's made the current situation so difficult.

7.2. There is a need for multiple phases of support

- 7.2.1. Emergency responses were decisive. We are now entering a longer phase where the sector will need to be sustained before it can relaunch. For many producing and touring organisations the impact of the crisis is likely to hit some way after the critical event.
- 7.2.2. Flexibility is important when measures are introduced quickly: when you can't take time to get something right, it needs to be adaptable as you learn more.

7.3. Theatre is not purely entertainment - we embrace our communities and need better support to do so

- 7.3.1. We need better linkage between arts and education at governmental level.
- 7.3.2. Better communication with the public about the investment THEY make in THEIR cultural sector is needed.

7.4. Accessibility and diversity need to be a priority

- 7.4.1. Accessible formats of documentation and information must become the norm.
- 7.4.2. Relaxing reporting has been helpful short-term, however, funders still need to hold people and organisations to account especially on the Creative Case For Diversity. Financial Support that comes now should include requirements to make the work produced accessible, inclusive and sustainable.

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

“We dream of a future in which the arts and theatre are funded, owned and used by every tax payer.”

8.1. Touring companies have been the glue between the different theatre strands- how do we encourage more communication across the theatre sector

- 8.1.1. Specific financial support is needed for non-building based artists and companies to produce and tour within a sector specific support package as outlined above.
- 8.1.2. Touring organisations and venues will also need to work together in order to ensure minority voices are invested in, valued and not left out. Audiences will need stories from all different walks of life to bring communities back together following this period; audiences from minority backgrounds must be engaged and represented on

our stages. DCMS can support this by ensuring this is matched with funding requirements.

- 8.1.3. Extension of Theatre Tax Relief. Extended to cover running costs for touring companies, as we technically remount the show in each venue we visit. Extended to digital and marketing costs.
- 8.1.4. Cultural organisations can play a huge role in bringing communities together again, particularly in the context of schools and health and wellbeing. There is a need for stronger dialogue with the DFE and DHSC to join up ways of working and available funding. ACE's "Let's Create" is a good place to start - but will need more resources post-COVID.
- 8.1.5. If commercial theatre companies and venues receive significant financial support from DCMS then there should be a levy (suggested 3%) on commercial ticket sales which goes back to the subsidised sector through ACE or new funding streams.