

## Independent UK Covid Crisis Response Summary of EU Commission Report on 'The situation of circus in the EU Member States' (Jan 2020)

Prepared by Katharine Kavanagh  
Cardiff University

### Introduction

In a time of crisis it is essential to have data on those affected in order to know how best to ensure their survival and support their recovery. Until now, the UK circus sector has been under-researched and, as a result of this, artists and workers in the circus sector are among those who fall through the cracks of existing aid mechanisms, imperilling lives and livelihoods of circus artists and workers.

As data on the circus sector has not been recorded at a national level before the onset of the Covid19 pandemic, this document summarises the relevant socioeconomic aspects of the recent (Jan 2020) European Commission report into circus in Europe. The report provides some broader evidence of particular rescue measures required now at a national level in the UK, noting that circus is a fragile sector that 'often offers precarious or atypical working conditions' (79).

This document summarises the findings of the report to inform the next important step: A set of actions must be prioritised based on these findings and upon the current situation caused by the Covid19 pandemic.

### The Report

The report (Panteia et al., 2020), published just before the Covid19 outbreak, acknowledges that the circus sector was already 'fragile' (25). As within the UK, data on the circus sector across Europe is 'lacking' (6). For this reason, the study combined secondary data sources from existing organisations and primary data from expert interviews, online surveys and focus groups, as well as preparing case studies, to provide the best picture currently available. Many of the statistical reports available from other member states have not been available from the UK because we do not have an independent organisation to support the entire sector as some other countries do. One strand of the EU study focused on the socioeconomic situation of circus in member states. Other strands focused on education for children of circus workers, the innovation potential of the sector, and the engagement with specific EU funding opportunities.

This document focuses only on the **socioeconomic** strand, and highlights the recommendations that were made for member states to follow to improve the socioeconomic position of circus companies and workers. It also highlights the barriers that were noted, which need to be addressed. Further information is provided which sheds light on the working practices and business realities of the circus sector

It should also be noted that the EU report only focuses on those parts of the circus sector dedicated to creating and presenting performance products to audiences. However, it also recognises that the sector is further made up of 'circus schools, universities, creation centres, festivals and venues', as well as organisations and individuals working in the realm of 'social circus', which focuses on improving personal and social well-being through the development and sharing of circus skills (19).

More of the survey participants identified as working in 'contemporary' rather than 'classical/traditional' practice, which the report recognises as a possible result of the research

method rather than a reflection of the sector's make-up (24). Accordingly, the perspective of those working in classical/traditional circus is under-represented in the report (26), particularly those working in smaller companies (94).

## Recommendations

- Circus should be recognised 'as an art form in itself and part of the performing arts' (13). The definition used for circus in the report is:

'a performance of act(s) or original shows and performances taking place in tents, theatres, open spaces or any other suitable location and using primarily one or more of the recognised circus disciplines<sup>1</sup>, either in combination with other arts disciplines or not and either presented as acts on its own, or as acts performed in relation to each other or as an original show and performance.' (8)

This explicitly includes **all forms of circus**, including those sometimes distinguished by the contentious and complex terms 'traditional/classic' and 'contemporary'.<sup>2</sup>

- The 'large diversity of the sector' should be considered at all levels of policy (13). This includes diversity of working requirements, organisational structures, audience demographics and worker demographics. This wide diversity results in different challenges and needs across the sector that one-size-fits-all policy cannot meet.
- Stronger data must be collected to better observe the sector and appropriately tailor aid.
- Cooperation should be stimulated between the areas of circus often separated by the terms 'classical/traditional' and 'contemporary' to enable exchange of knowledge and experience.
- Circus organisations should be supported and encouraged to undertake audience research 'in order to improve their shows and optimise their potential audience volume' (14).
- The digital revolution offers opportunities for the sector. Stimulation should be provided to encourage and support use of these opportunities.
- Application procedures for funding should be simplified and more targeted support arranged for the circus sector for the preparatory stage of any application process, 'which could also be a financial incentive' (75).
- A 'more versatile range of funding options' (84), with flexible guidelines and evaluation criteria should be offered.
- Access to travel and mobility grants would be beneficial.
- A dissemination role to share information about what opportunities are available and possible would be useful.

---

<sup>1</sup> These are described as (but not limited to): 'Acrobatics/acrobalance and other human physical skills with or without using apparatus such as springboard or parallel bars, Equilibristics (e.g. balancing skills using apparatus such as stilts, tightropes, cycles), Object manipulation (e.g. juggling with hands or feet, plate twirling, diabolo), Aerial skills using apparatus (e.g. trapeze, cloud swing, cordelisse, tisseau), Clowning and physical comedy, Animal skills and presentations (in collaboration with a human performer e.g. bare-back horse rider or presented by a trainer: anything from budgies to lions) and Specialist acts such as Ringmaster, Magical Illusion and Western Skills' (19)

<sup>2</sup> This recommendation also follows the European Parliament's call in 2005 for all member states to recognise circus as a part of Europe's culture (17).

### **Barriers to funding access**

Receipt of public funding 'seems to be non-existent among traditional/classical circus companies' (25). The report also identified 'limited participation of organisations' in existing EU funding schemes (12), suggesting that circus organisations are not taking full advantage of available funding opportunities. Barriers to participation identified by the report include:

- Lack of knowledge and information about available funds.
- The level of administrative work required to create and submit applications is seen as 'too complicated and burdensome' (12)
- Creative professionals often lack sufficient time to complete the work required to submit an application.
- A financial outlay is often required to employ someone to carry out the necessary administrative work.
- A low success rate from those who do apply can be off-putting to repeat attempts or to others.
- A lack of versatility in funding criteria excludes many in the circus sector.

### **How circus work works**

- The circus sector encompasses 'a wide variety in the legal forms of companies and company sizes' (23).
- Circus companies often 'work in a multifunctional pattern to survive, considering how fragile the sector is' (25).
- International mobility is 'at the heart of the sector' and is 'required in order to have sufficient performing opportunities to be able to sufficiently earn a living' (34).
- Most circus professionals 'cannot be defined by one particular category' and 'work in various occupations and various parts of the circus sector' (26).
- Employment arrangements are 'atypical', rarely conforming to standard definitions of employment such as 8 hours a day, 5 days a week (31)
- Circus work is taken up in a variety of forms: full-time employment, part-time employment, and as freelance contracts for the self-employed. It is common for circus professionals to work interchangeably across all these different forms of employment as part of a portfolio career.
- There has been an increase in self-employment within the circus sector. Self-employment is a precarious position due to lack of job security, lack of stable income and lack of access to benefits. Additional precarity comes from the multiplicity of different legal requirements for work in different countries and organisations. For performers, further precarity is associated with risk of injury (33).
- The sector is predominantly peopled with creative professionals (such as performers, directors, choreographers). Other, less common, roles include 'administrator, producer, circus owner, agent, academic, technician, educator for travelling children, marketer, consultant, rigger, crew, groom, funder, financier, caterer, those in administrative functions (such as payroll, publicist or any other role non-artistic role) and 'trainers'' (26-27).

### **The circus business**

- 'Classical/traditional' circus companies were found to have higher numbers of performances, higher audience attendance and larger turnover figures than 'contemporary' companies, as necessitated by their larger sizes and higher overheads.
- It is rare to see events or festivals which incorporate representations of both 'contemporary' and 'classical/traditional' circus and 'which encourage learning and exchange between the two' (64).

- Spectator numbers and financial success can be adversely affected by unexpected weather conditions<sup>3</sup>.
- Expectations of audience members can be a challenge to circus companies as the form evolves, and especially in relation to animal performance<sup>4</sup> (63).
- ‘Contemporary’ circus has ‘easier access to and receives relatively more public funding and other support’ than ‘classical/traditional’ circus (77).
- The ‘contemporary’ field of circus has seen rapid growth, which can be linked to the institutionalisation of those parts of the sector.

## The UK

A combined estimate included in the report cites the Association of Circus Proprietors (ACP) and the Circus Development Network to suggest at least 500 circus workers in the UK. However, this seems conservative, as a 2010 estimate by the Circus Development Agency of the UK and Eire noted ‘1,600 circus artists (traditional and contemporary) worked on a professional level in these countries in 2010’ (Ellingsworth and Cornwall, 2011:9). As the EU report recognises, the circus sector also includes many workers who are not themselves ‘artists’, such as administrators, trainers and crew. Moreover, the picture overall across Europe was ‘a stable situation with positive developments’ (Panteia et al., 2020:31), so this figure of 1600 is unlikely to have decreased. The most recent data reported also shows the estimated number of circus companies in the UK doubled between 2003 and 2011. The low citation has also caused concern for the ACP, whose secretary Paul Archer has provided this statement:

‘Further to the conversation just now regarding my concerns on the accuracy of the figures from the European Circus report, and conversations with the Chairman Martin Burton, we both feel that the figures are rather conservative in the estimated number of Circus workers, both staff and artistes.

Based on ACP members and non-members in the commercial sector, both touring and static out last year, we feel that there are directly 1100 people that are affected by the current pandemic...this commercial number doesn't factor in the indirect people that the pandemic has also impacted on like printers, publicity and marketing people, choreographers, musicians, directors and producers.’ (Archer, 2020)

It is also important to note that this is an estimate based only on commercial sector organisations, so does not include many organisations and individuals who work within the subsidised arts and corporate sectors. The Circus Friends Association magazine, ‘King Pole’, publishes an annual directory of UK circus and the most recent edition lists 67 production companies (Fiske and Kavanagh, 2019) and 41 circus schools (Kavanagh, 2019). In 2018, the Circus250 promotional organisation compiled a database of over 500 circus events that occurred over the year in the UK and Ireland (Birkett, 2020). An emergency report produced by the UK’s youth circus network in the early days of the Covid-19 lockdown measures is vital reading, including the statistic that 74% of survey respondents estimated 100% loss of income due to the crisis. By the end of March alone, the 27 youth circuses that had so far responded already reported losses of £188,199.00 (CircusWorks,

---

<sup>3</sup> Much circus work is seasonal, although this is not directly noted in the report.

<sup>4</sup> For example, many audience members expect to see animals in a circus production. Some do not attend and lobby against circus because of this, while others are disappointed when they do not see animals and so also stop attending on the opposite account.

2020:7-8). As well as the financial impact on organisations, this report also notes the significant personal impact on staff and youth participants.

The most glaring observation across the UK, however, is the **lack of comprehensive data** on the entire sector.

It is also important to remember that, with the UK's imminent departure from the EU, the funding opportunities highlighted in the EU report will cease to be available to the workers and organisations of the British circus sector.

## References

- Archer, P. 2020. *RE: Help save our circus thread*. Personal Correspondance: Email dated 18/05/2020.
- Birkett, D. 2020. *RE: Help save our circus thread: Updated report summary*. Personal Correspondance: Email dated 19/05/2020.
- CircusWorks 2020. Impact survey: Covid-19 and UK youth circus. CircusWorks.
- Ellingsworth, J. & Cornwall, V. 2011. An overview of circus and street arts in the UK and ROI. CasCas.
- Fiske, J. & Kavanagh, K. 2019. 2019 circus directory of the British Isles, *King Pole*. Norwich, Circus Friends Association. 44-47
- Kavanagh, K. 2019. 2019 circus school directory of United Kingdom and Ireland, *King Pole*. Norwich, Circus Friends Association. 38-40
- Panteia, Snijders, J., Goes, M., Clarke, M. & Vroonhof, P. 2020. The situation of circus in the EU member states. Luxembourg: European Commission.