

Rt Hon Michelle Donelan,
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport,
100 Parliament St,
London,
SW1A 2BQ

22/11/2022

Dear Secretary of State,

Equity represents over 47,000 performers and creative practitioners working throughout the UK's creative industries.

As you will know, we have been advocating for our members engaged by English National Opera (ENO) at the London Coliseum, as Chorus, Stage Management, Actors, Dancers, and Creative Team members. We have written to formally ask Arts Council England (ACE) to reverse their decision to remove ENO as a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) with effect from April 2023.

We have also demanded that 100% funding cuts to Oldham Coliseum, Donmar Warehouse, Hampstead Theatre, The Watermill, The Gate and the Regional Theatre Young Director Scheme should be reversed.

These decisions taken by ACE mean our members are now facing the terrifying prospect of the loss of both permanent and freelance jobs.

These decisions are ill-judged and ill-considered. In the case of the ENO, there has been no regard for the devastating impact on the specialist work force. Particularly affected amongst our membership are the Chorus who are employed permanently and some of our Stage Management. Indeed, no regard whatsoever appears to have been made for this permanent workforce and no plan put in place for them – a workforce who are the product of years of training, experience and expertise and who are not replaceable.

Our members are now facing the worst of all possible worlds with the potential removal of any of the job security that nine months of regular employment conferred and the total collapse of their income by April 2023. Across the country, there are less than 200 full time chorus jobs of which 40 are based at English National Opera. This guaranteed income will be difficult if not entirely impossible to replace with work as Opera Singers elsewhere. They have additionally built their lives and the lives of their families around their primary working location at the ENO in London with all the higher costs that incurs.

ACE have suggested that it may be possible for ENO to relocate and are prepared to provide limited funding for this. However, this would take much planning and much time. It cannot be achieved

overnight. It is our view that as a first step the ENO would inevitably be forced to make the entire artistic and technical workforce redundant, destroying the very basis on which Opera could be produced.

Although Equity can only speak on behalf of Equity members, we are conscious that the withdrawal of funding will equally affect the Orchestra, Music Staff and the Technical Staff whose skills, along with those of our members, are absolutely necessary for the production of Opera, to the standard required.

ACE do not appear to have taken into consideration any of the important work that the ENO have done to modernise and diversify their workforce including the Chorus and their principal Singers. It seems as though the reward for ENO's compliance with all that ACE have required over the previous years has been a devastating withdrawal of all guaranteed funding. Nor would it seem that ACE have allowed any time for the ENO to build back from the pandemic.

It was suggested that ENO should relocate to Manchester in ACE's announcement of NPO decisions. Yet at the same time it was announced that increased funding has been awarded to Opera North who already have an audience and presence in Manchester. The relocation does not therefore seem a credible suggestion.


What has also subsequently emerged is the instruction that was allegedly given to ACE by DCMS as to where its spending decisions should be directed – a revelation that undermines the foundation of ACE as an arm's length body and indicates that some of these cuts appear to be politically rather than economically motivated.

The Government may claim that this is part of delivering a "levelling up agenda". However, while 70% of cuts fall within London, the overwhelming majority of organisations removed from the national portfolio fall outside of London. The decision to cut 100% of funding to Oldham Coliseum further exposes the myth that the Government is serious about levelling up in the north. The Coliseum provides opportunities for local people, including many Equity members and cutting funding in this way without proper consideration of a workforce plan means that our members, already facing a huge hike in energy costs as winter approaches will now be worrying about the prospect of losing a vital source of work and income.

There is no levelling up without good arts jobs. And there is no economic growth without proper investment in culture in London and beyond.

We therefore call on you as Secretary of State to deliver an increase to UK arts funding immediately to enable Arts Council England to reverse cuts to ENO and other arts organisations and protect jobs in a crucial sector of the economy.

I look forward to hearing from you.



Paul Fleming
General Secretary