

Accommodation for Theatre Workers: Dignity in Digs Briefing

This briefing is designed to provide an overview of Equity's findings into our members' experiences with accommodation when they are working away from home in the UK. It includes reference to the experiences of members who have been working on touring productions, and members who have worked away from home on a production taking place in one venue, across both the commercial and subsidised sectors.

What evidence base does Equity have for this report and the claims submitted on both the subsidised and commercial theatre agreements?

- A January 2022 survey of theatre workers
- July 2022 consultations in advance of preparing claims
- Workplace meetings across the UK, on commercial tours and on subsidised productions
- Responses to our Dodgy Digs Reporting Tool
- A snapshot digs survey from January 2023

What is the current situation?

- Commercial Theatre: £195 per week subsistence, £300 per week touring allowance
- Subsidised Theatre: £188.15 per week subsistence, £265 per week touring allowance

What are the problems with current arrangements?

"It is wrong that a professional actor/stage manager etc, working away for their job, should have to live in someone's spare room. It's outdated, demeaning and sometimes not safe, and I doubt it happens in any other industry."

The allowances members receive under the agreements are not enough to enable them to secure somewhere that is close to the venue they are working in, clean and hygienic, and private. In order to stay somewhere that meets all three of these important criteria, theatre workers will regularly top up the allowance they receive with their own pay – or sacrifice at least one of these criteria to keep within the allowance they are provided with.

This problem is particularly acute in subsistence weeks, because no digs host makes a distinction between someone who is receiving £188.15 a week and someone receiving £300. The amounts charged to theatre workers are the same, and therefore the allowances paid in any week should be the same.

Inadequate digs lists

"The traditional digs system (a digs list from the theatre of varying types of accommodation) has almost disappeared. It's now predominantly Airbnb or similar sites which prices most theatre workers out of the market. On the rare occasion I've been offered a digs list, you call the people on it and they tell you they asked to be removed from the list months ago, or there are only a handful of options for a company of 40 people. It just doesn't work anymore."

The lack of staffing resources in venues has meant that digs lists are commonly either no longer offered, or woefully out of date, and information about the local area, the facilities and transport options available to touring workers is not provided¹. This leaves a visiting workforce vulnerable – when people do not know the town or city they have arrived in, they do not know where to avoid late at night, how to get home safely or other key information about where they are. When allowances are too low to afford somewhere close to the workplace, many of our members have to travel on their own through streets they do not know to accommodation on the edges of urban centres.

Risks to worker safety

"I had booked myself into a digs about a 30 minute walk away from the theatre because it was all I could afford. I walked home the way google maps told me to, and then on about day three in the venue one of the local staff was talking about how loads of women had been sexually harassed recently in the area I was walking through – at night, on my own, as a young woman in a strange town."

In the last 12 months, Equity has received numerous reports directly from Global Majority performers and stage management team members, and second-hand from Equity deputies, about racial abuse and racist assaults people have experienced walking alone at night in unfamiliar places.²

In 2022, at least five of our members were physically attacked on their way back to their digs, with one requiring a prolonged stay in hospital with time away from work to receive treatment for the

¹ The few exceptions to this are a small number of subsidised theatre venues, where members report various examples of good practice around the maintenance of digs lists.

² Under current arrangements, touring allowance is meant to cover 'additional costs of being away from home'. In reality, members spend more than they receive on accommodation – leaving nothing for bus or taxi fares back to their accommodation.



horrific injuries they sustained after being beaten up in the street. Additionally, members who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, or who are perceived as queer, can face particular problems in smaller towns that are home to significantly less diverse populations than our major cities. In our January 2022 survey we asked “Have you ever felt unsafe, or been in an unsafe situation when travelling to or from your accommodation?” and only 13% of respondents said that this had never been the case.

The issue of accommodation is therefore primarily one of safety, and dignity whilst at work.

Poor quality & lack of industry oversight

“The landlady couldn’t climb stairs anymore so apparently got a cleaner in. That cleaner hadn’t been up to the room she was renting out, clearly. There was cat faeces on the bedding, plus other people’s hair and thick layers of dust on everything. I told my producer what was happening and he just shrugged at me. It was my first tour and I had no idea that it was like this. The lack of care was shocking”

The outsourcing of digs to the workers themselves has resulted in an increased reliance on third party websites such as Theatre Digs Booker and Airbnb, creating a landscape in which theatre workers fall victim to ‘catfish digs’ – digs that look fine in the photos and reviews, but turn out to be unsuitable in reality.

In some cases these can be relatively minor issues, such as the décor in the room looking a bit tired compared to the photos, but in others it can be much more significant. Members with accessibility requirements have, for example, reported instances where the digs listing and communication with the host provided assurance that the bedroom they were booking was on the ground floor, only to discover that there were steps to the property that were not referenced prior to their arrival. Members who are allergic to animal fur have been told that the property is pet free, and have found that there are in fact household pets who might not be allowed in the bedroom they have booked, but will wander freely in common areas such as the kitchen and hallways.

Accommodation issues can also be more dangerous and violating than an issue with the upkeep of the property. Global Majority theatre workers have reported racist comments from hosts, and LGBTQ+ people have reported homophobia and transphobia. Additionally, there are the odd and unreasonable ‘house rules’ that members have shared with us which cover a broad spectrum of stipulations that are unviable for people whose working hours are not 9-5. Theatre workers regularly contend with issues such as the heating not being allowed on in winter during the day when the host is out at work, being told they can’t use the shower after 10pm at night because the noise of the water tank will wake up the host’s family, not being provided with access to cooking equipment and not having access to hot water when they need it.

This outsourcing of digs leaves theatre workers with little support in the event of problems. On Airbnb in particular, it is reasonably

common for a digs host to cancel a booking at short notice – particularly when a booking was made far in advance at a lower rate than the host could now achieve were they to re-list the property. This was a significant problem for theatre workers during COP-26 in Glasgow, and resulted in people having to travel in to work from as far away as Edinburgh and Carlisle where producers did not intervene to assist them. This issue is however not limited to one-off, set-piece global conferences and also poses regular problems in coastal towns and cities in the summer months, and in popular tourist destinations such as Oxford and Bath at Christmas.

The rise of Airbnb has meant that those with spare bedrooms or properties available for short-term rental have a commodity available to them from which they seek to extract maximum revenue. This is no longer a world of kindly theatre fans wanting to support the sector by providing a warm and comfortable home for a travelling worker, but a seller’s market in which theatre workers compete directly with holidaymakers and others who have greater ability to meet higher prices for the best located and well maintained properties.

“I don’t want to stay in some strangers’ spare room, and I don’t see why I should have to when I am travelling for my job. I don’t see why I should have to top up the allowance with my own pay just to afford somewhere that is just ok. Not palatial, not luxurious – just ok.”

Costs and allowances structure

“I get the allowance the week before, which means I can only book the week before, which means prices are higher than the allowance and you’re left with bad options. I think if we got the allowance more in advance I might be able to afford more suitable places because I’d have more lead time for booking myself in somewhere and and it would be less stressful.”

When allowances are paid one week in advance of the week they relate to, it is very difficult for members without substantial savings to book in advance and in so doing secure a cheaper rate. One member, on a recent 12-month UK tour, booked their digs for every venue when they had signed their contract at a total cost of just under £15,000, paid for on the credit card of a partner who does not work in the theatre industry. Not every worker has access to this kind of financial support – and nor should their ability to take a job working away from home be dependent on whether they can front up the costs associated with doing so.

It is members who are paid the least that are at highest risk from problems with digs. Those on higher weekly rates of pay are more able to top up their allowances with their pay in order to secure somewhere suitable for them – but a worker paid the minimum rate cannot do this when they still have rent, bills and other financial obligations to meet related to their home address. On a recent UK tour, a member chose to put herself in budget hotels



for the duration where she was unable to stay with friends. On a 12 week tour she spent three weeks staying with friends and nine weeks were spent in a budget hotel. She spent a total of £4,613 – or, £84 per week more than the total allowance she received over the period. This is possible for a worker earning far in excess of the minimum rate, but not viable for those on the lowest pay.

Impact on physical and mental health, and on job performance

“At a place in Birmingham the digs listing said it was a single bed, but when I turned up there was some excuse about why it was only a sofa (not a sofa bed – a sofa). It was too small for my body but I couldn’t find anywhere else so I slept on that sofa for a fortnight. That was three months ago and I’ve still got back problems.”

A common theme in the responses to the consultation exercises Equity has run on the question of digs is the levels of stress and misery accommodation issues cause for people who are required to manage these situations largely unsupported whilst also working in demanding, full time jobs away from home and their usual support networks. This stress has an impact on the quality of their work, with 84% of respondents to our January 2022 survey stating that accommodation problems regularly or sometimes mean that they cannot do their jobs to their usual standard. In the same survey, 58% of respondents said that accommodation issues have had a detrimental impact on their mental health.

The solution

“The money has got to go up. Simple.”

On both the commercial and subsidised agreements, Equity has claimed the following, as a long overdue structural change to the provision of accommodation for theatre workers working away from home.

- A single Living Away allowance of £400 per week to apply in all weeks.
- Living Away allowance to be paid four weeks in advance of the week the money relates to
- A new per diem, ring-fenced and separate from the money provided for accommodation
- On Tier A* and A Commercial tours, producers should take responsibility for sourcing and providing accommodation – with the worker given the option of taking the Living Away allowance instead
- On all tours that visit Dublin/ROI, the producer should take responsibility for sourcing and providing accommodation for the workforce

It’s time for Dignity in Digs.

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