

## **Equity written submission to DCMS open consultation: Developing a tourist accommodation registration scheme in England: call for evidence**

This submission was prepared by Equity and responds direct to the following consultation questions:

- 6) Do you consider the increase in short-term and holiday letting in England to have had adverse consequences on the housing market?
- 13) Is there any other information related to short term lettings and/or the issues already raised in this call for evidence that you wish to draw to the government's attention?

For more information, please contact Liam Budd, Policy Officer at [lbudd@equity.org.uk](mailto:lbudd@equity.org.uk).

### **About Equity**

Equity is the UK trade union for the performing arts and entertainment industries. We represent over 47,000 performers and creative workers. Our membership is made up of actors, choreographers, dancers, theatre directors, models, singers, stage management, stand ups, storytellers, stunt performers and co-ordinators, theatre designers, theatre fight directors, TV and radio presenters, variety, circus, cabaret and light entertainment artists, voice artists, walk-on and supporting artists.

### **Response**

We welcome the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport assessing the impact of term and holiday letting across in England as part of a consultation on the introduction of a tourist accommodation registration scheme. The chronic shortage of affordable homes means that house prices have increased exponentially, as has the amount landlords and homeowners now charge for rent, including short-term and holiday letting. The emergence of Airbnb, Booking.com and other online platforms has made it easier for homeowners to temporarily let out their property, and spare rooms have turned into a lucrative commodities and driving up prices across the market.

These development in the housing market have significantly impacted the live performance workforce. The vast majority of Equity members are self-employed and portfolio workers. Many work away on location or as part of touring production and therefore rely on short-term lettings. For decades live performance workers have used the 'digs list' system<sup>1</sup>. The touring theatre workforce, including actors, stage managers and backstage staff, access lists compiled by engagers<sup>2</sup> that advertised spare rooms, often under the roof of theatre fans. The rates for these rooms are generally in line with touring allowances, which is agreed by the unions and provided to pay for accommodation as well as food and other additional costs while touring with a production.

Unfortunately the 'digs list' system has become increasingly unsustainable in recent years. Profits to be gained from listing accommodation at full price on the open market means that there is less accommodation on offer. In addition, as theatres across the UK have faced reductions in operations staffing, the maintenance of digs lists for visiting companies has been deprioritised. Production companies now have fewer staff available to compile digs lists.

The Covid pandemic also contributed to this shortage. Whilst theatre tours operated under social distancing rules, the number of people offering digs declined sharply as members of the public were less prepared to house guests due to safety concerns. These concerns continue to be felt even after

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatredigsbooker.com/>

<sup>2</sup> A person or business who engages self-employed individuals for work

the end of social distancing and the supply of digs for the touring workforce has not returned to pre pandemic levels.

These factors have forced our members to use digital platforms like Airbnb or Theatre Digs Booker which charge rates much higher than those on the pre-approved digs list provided by theatre companies. Last year, the average price for self-contained accommodation for two people on the Theatre Digs Booker website came to £536 a week, more than triple the cost for the same arrangement with a live-in host at £152. We recently conducted a survey of performing arts practitioners and 91% said that they face fewer options and higher accommodation costs in the wake of the pandemic.

Within this context of rising costs, many of our members are using their own wages to supplement the touring allowances provided by producers for work-related accommodation. It is important to highlight that low and no pay is a serious issue in sections of the performing arts and entertainment industry. The average annual earnings for Equity members from work in the industry is just £11,500.

*“My accommodation has cost a weekly average of £300 to £620 with the extra amounts coming out of my own pay, and this included an Airbnb in Edinburgh that turned out to lack a fully working toilet.”*

The shortage of affordable accommodation is having a knock-on effect on members’ safety and wellbeing. Most affordable rooms are rarely close to venues, which means many of our members are forced to travel long distances to and from their accommodation, and often late at night. There have been instances on commercial tours where Black and global majority company members in towns and cities outside of London have been racially attacked. Data from our recent digs survey identified the following:

- When asked if they’ve ever felt unsafe, or been in an unsafe situation when travelling to or from accommodation, 52% of respondents said this was an occasional occurrence whilst 19% said it happened regularly.
- A significant third (32%) of respondents said issues around quality and safety mean they’re regularly unable to do the job to the best of their ability.
- 55% of survey respondents stated that previous experiences with accommodation made you less likely to audition/apply for a job which would involve working away from home.
- Nearly one in five respondents said that digs-related issues impacted their mental health.

An Equity member stated the following: *“We’ve got young members of our company regularly having to walk 40 minutes through a town they don’t know late at night after the show ends because they just can’t afford to stay anywhere closer. We know someone who is awaiting an operation because he was attacked, unprovoked, walking back to his digs. These are real issues that have been reported and my big worry is that it will take something quite desperate to happen before it’s properly addressed – and I just want to do whatever I can to avoid that. I’m reaching a point where, unless the system changes, it’s becoming hard to justify touring in the UK again. Which is something, as an actor deeply passionate about this industry, I honestly never thought I’d say”.*

The shortage of affordable accommodation has significant equalities implications. It has become increasingly difficult for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to afford to tour. This is also the case for members with caring responsibilities due to a lack of affordable digs with space for partners or children. Accommodation pressures are also very acute for disabled workers who often need to be located closer to their workplace with higher accommodation fees, and therefore have to juggle costs and accessibility needs. This is stifling talent and fuelling our industries’ ongoing problem of elitism.

In addition, the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating financial pressures facing many of our members.

- 47% of respondents to our recent survey stated that they had already experienced difficulties in meeting essential costs during the period 2021-2.
- 60% of respondents anticipate difficulty in meeting essential costs (e.g. housing, rent, food, childcare, utility bills) due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Our priority is to ensure our members can access safe, affordable, and suitable accommodation that is as close to the performance venue as possible. Through our collective bargaining framework, our priority demand on producers is to increase the touring allowances immediately. Producers must also remember that their duty of care extends beyond the walls of the venue. We have also challenged individual theatres and performance venues to make sure they offer up-to-date, adequate information and we will be working with the management association UK Theatre on improving the accommodation information and support available to the workforce from UK Theatre member venues.

However, a significant onus is on the government to tackle the systemic problems found across our broken housing market. The introduction of tourist accommodation registration scheme would be a welcome step to capture the health and safety compliance of accommodation providers in England. However, appropriate mechanisms are needed to ensure this is enforced by landlords. Moreover, we desperately need policies to make housing more affordable for everyone. This includes rent controls decided by democratic bodies that significantly reduce rents and take account of local incomes. The government should also implement the promised end to no fault (Section 21) evictions immediately, remove end dates from tenancies, and place limits on rent rises.

If the government, Arts Councils, industry producers and engagers are serious about high-quality creative work reaching all areas of the country, a real collective effort to think of a new way of providing quality accommodation for our members has to be made.