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Children to get more opportunities to perform in amateur productions

- Government commits to overhauling outdated child performance laws

The Government is today calling on local authorities and amateur groups to give children every opportunity to perform in local shows. Burdensome licensing laws are preventing some amateur groups from involving children in their productions, which is creating a postcode lottery of opportunities for children to get on the stage.

The Government is today reminding amateur groups that they don't need to apply for individual licences for every child for every performance. Instead the local authority can issue an approval to cover all performances for all children, as appropriate to the needs of the amateur group.

New guidance published today makes this clearer and will free up local authorities and amateur groups from unnecessary form filling.

This comes as the Government commits to updating the 40 year old child performance laws, helped by an Advisory Group including amateur theatre groups, production companies, broadcasters, children's charities and child psychologists. They will look at whether the amateur sector can be removed from licensing laws altogether in the future.

Children's Minister Tim Loughton said:

"We have a great tradition of amateur theatre in this country, especially at this time of the year when the local pantomime or Christmas show brings local communities together. It is crazy that some children are being denied the chance to perform in local shows and that some amateur groups avoid putting on shows with children's roles. Local authorities are doing their best to follow the law but amateur groups have been put off from applying for child performance licences.

"That's why we need to review the law in the future, and in the meantime we are making it clearer to local licensing officers and amateur groups how they can make it quicker and easier to involve children in amateur performances.

"Performing gives children fantastic skills and helps them build their confidence. The law needs reviewing to ensure children are not denied the opportunities of performing in an amateur or professional capacity. But there is also agreement that we must keep children safe from potential exploitation and make sure their education doesn't suffer.

"I am really pleased that we will be advised by experts in this area including the amateur sector, production companies, children's charities and child psychologists. They all agree that the current laws are no longer fit for purpose and they are best placed to suggest how to update them in children's best interests. I look forward to seeing the results of their work over the coming year."

Sir Ian McKellen, Patron of the Little Theatre Guild, said:

"As Patron of the Little Theatre Guild I am delighted that the Children's Minister is to facilitate a working group to consider future arrangements, within amateur theatre, to safeguard youngsters. Any additional burden on amateur companies would be regrettable, as existing provisions can be improved and the sort of rules, necessary within the professional theatre, would inhibit the Guild's honourable and long-standing tradition to introduce children to

theatre, within a safe and enjoyable environment.”

Eddie Redfern, Chairman of the Little Theatre Guild (LTG) said:

“I have long championed the need for clarity of the existing rules so that local authorities are able to interpret them in a uniform way. The current arrangements deter many amateur theatre companies from putting on plays with children in them, because they see an onerous burden of compliance. Member theatres of the LTG are also concerned that many theatrical societies do not even know the regulations exist and see no enforcement of the rules on those societies.”

The Advisory Group will build on the recommendations of Sarah Thane’s independent review of child performance earlier this year and will look to strike the right balance between giving children every opportunity to perform, protecting editorial independence, and keeping children safe.

Over the next few months the Government is setting up working groups to address the major issues that were highlighted in the Thane report, that need further consideration.

These include:

- **Scope of Performance**, led by Sarah Thane - proposing the different types of performances that should be regulated e.g. taking part in a long running television series or musical production, in contrast to a one-off appearance in a documentary.
- **Improving safeguarding arrangements**, led by John Oates of the British Psychological Society and John McVay of Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT) – looking at the evidence, benefits and risks of child performance, building on the best examples of good safeguarding arrangements already being used by production companies and theatre groups, as identified in the Thane review.
- **Consider removing the amateur sector from law**, led by Ian Hart of the National Network and Eddie Redfern of the Little Theatre Guild – looking at whether alternative safeguards to protect children should be put in place instead of licenses for the amateur sector.

Sarah Thane, former chair of the Royal Television Society and former advisor to Ofcom said:

"I warmly welcome today's announcement and the fact that the Government is prepared to act now on a range of my review recommendations.

“It's good that key stakeholders will be closely involved in shaping the necessary reforms to the system of licensing child performance. Our shared goal is for children to be free to experience and enjoy performing with proper regard for their welfare.”

John McVay, Chief Executive of Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT) said:

“PACT welcomes this Government’s commitment to complete the necessary review and reform of the legislation and regulations that govern child performance. The interests of children are central to this review not only in ensuring that they are appropriately protected but also that every child has the opportunity to develop, show their own talents and express themselves. I am delighted to have been asked to be one of the facilitators of a new working

group that will consider how safeguards can be improved for children.”

Ian Hart, Chair of the National Network for Children in Employment and Entertainment (NNCEE) said:

“The NNCEE warmly welcomes the Minister’s exciting announcement. It is something we have been campaigning for over a number of years. We look forward to working with all interested stakeholders to bring about change that represents the industry in the 21st century and providing more and better opportunities for children.

John Oates, British Psychological Society, said:

“The British Psychological Society puts a high priority on protecting the rights and well-being of individuals, and is pleased to be able to contribute its expertise to developing safeguarding principles for the wide range of performances and media genres which increasingly involve children and young people.”

The government will consult in 2011 on proposals for changing the law. All members of the Advisory Group will be invited to take part in one of the working groups.

Notes to editors:

1. The new guidance and Sarah Thane’s recommendations can be found here <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/safeguarding/safeguardingchildren/a0068886/safeguarding-child-performers>
2. The new laws will relate to England only. The Government will discuss the implementation implications with the Devolved Administrations.
3. Recommendations from the Thane Review that will be considered by the Advisory Group and the Government include:
 - modernising the licensing system so it is a quicker process and more consistent across the country – so production companies don’t feel they can only recruit from certain areas of the country
 - greater flexibility and more guidance on working hours
 - improving the quality of education for child performers
 - improving the chaperone role, recognising its important safeguarding responsibility.
4. The current child performance laws were drawn up when there were only three TV channels. The regulations predate the creation of Ofcom and take no account of child protection and children’s safeguarding legislation passed in the last four decades.
5. The Advisory Group will include the following people and organisations:
Sarah Thane, former chair of the Royal Television Society and former advisor to Ofcom
Ian Hart and Terry Drury, National Network for Children in Employment and Entertainment
John McVay, Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT)
Eddie Redfern, Little Theatre Guild
John Oates, British Psychological Society
The Production Guild
BBC
Channel 4
Society of London Theatre and Theatrical Management Association
National Operatic and Dramatic Association

NSPCC
Kidscape
Barnados
The Mindful Policy Group
Stagecoach UK
Ofcom

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