

## Written evidence submitted by Dr Dorothy Finan

### **How the child performer/chaperone licensing system might be improved to facilitate safer, more efficient, and more regionally sustainable production of children's TV and video content in the UK**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Dr. Dorothy Finan, and I am a Lecturer in Cultural Industries based at the School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds. I am submitting evidence derived from a series of interviews conducted by myself and my co-researcher, Professor Kaori Suetomi from Nihon University in Japan into the workings of England's systems for licensing child performers, and what aspects of those systems might be improved. The insights of these participants can help shed light on how to make the production of children's TV and video content safer, more efficient, and more regionally sustainable, thereby responding to the following questions in the call for evidence:

1. Who is commissioning and making original, high-quality, TV and video content for children and young audiences in the UK?

a. How can they be best supported to make more?

The interviews with a set of six participants knowledgeable about child performer licensing were conducted in June 2025, supported by a small grant from the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation<sup>1</sup>, as the project originated as a comparative one to understand what might be learned between the UK and Japan from respective systems to safeguard children in the entertainment industries. The project received ethical approval from the University of Leeds. The participants quoted here are:

**Steve Ansell**, youth theatre director currently in charge of stage@leeds Young Company at the University of Leeds.

**Sarah De Souza**, head chaperone at Cameron Mackintosh Limited.

**Rachael Fullerton**, child licence co-ordinator at Child Licences.

**Ed Magee**, chair of the National Network for Children in Employment and Entertainment.

**Adelle Moss**, child licence co-ordinator and founder of AM Kids Agency and Agents of Young Performers Association (AYPA).

#### **Policy context**

In England, any TV production featuring a child performer must have a child performer

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dajf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/September-2024-Approved-Grants-List-1.pdf>

licence issued by the local council<sup>2</sup>. That is, “any performance in connection with which a child is made (whether for admission or otherwise)...any broadcasting performance...any performance (by whatever means) with a view to its use in a broadcast or such service in a film intended for public exhibition” (Children & Young Persons Act, 1963). This license normally takes around 21 working days to issue, and is at the discretion of the local authority’s child employment and entertainment officer, whose job it is to ensure the child is appropriately safeguarded, that their education is not disrupted, and that they have an appropriate chaperone.

The local authority (or “licensing authority” as per *The Children (Performances and Activities (England) Regulations)*) will usually require that a chaperone have an enhanced DBS check and obtain references, often undergoing an interview. This process of licensing chaperones is in addition to the performance license itself. However, as will be seen from below, the capacity of local councils to maximise the safety and efficiency of this system to enable the participation of children in the creation of high-quality content is not always as it should be. We found four key ideas for improvement relevant to the call for evidence within the data, which are detailed below:

### **1. A centralised digital system for child performer and chaperone licensing reinforced by checks on sets at local authority level.**

The strongest recommendation made by all participants was for a centralised digital system for managing child performer and chaperone licensing. Currently, “*each local authority has their own system for working, whether that be an electronic system or e-mail, and none of the systems talk to each other*”... “*it doesn’t work where you have portals that are costing a lot of money for that local authority, but they’re not talking to each other, so they are not actually effective at all*” (Adelle Moss). This could include a national database of qualified chaperones.

This would ideally be underpinned by the knowledge and experience of local authorities, who are currently responsible for enforcing these systems. In the words of Ed Magee, head of the National Network for Children in Employment and Entertainment (NNCEE, the association of local authority officers who deal with child performer licensing and chaperones) this is “*because we know the schools. And so we can go back and talk to the schools and ask how is this impacting on that child*”. Steve Ansell raised that inconsistency in information provided between councils, and difficulties in accessing the named person at the council in charge of child performer licensing makes it hard for those working with aspiring child performers, especially those from widening participation backgrounds, to “*do the right thing*” and provide opportunities for them to enter the entertainment industry, when there should be “*a nice central government website that’s really clear*”.

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<sup>2</sup> Meaning from birth to school leaving age (*The Children (Performances and Activities (England) Regulations*, 2014)

Having a centralised digital system for managing child performer licensing would also enable the participation of children in the creation of TV and video content in a more agile manner, creating breadth of opportunity. Being able to easily add in details about fittings and rehearsals would also help plug a gap outside of the final “performance”, where children are “vulnerable” and *it’s effectively outside of the regulatory environment, even though it’s in the primary legislation*” (Adelle Moss) And in a scenario where a child cast member is off sick and a licensed TV production must go ahead on a weekend, there is no way of contacting the local authority as they would have “closed at 5pm” on a Friday (Sarah De Souza). Without a single, secure, central way to modify details of the licensed production, those in the screen industries are reliant on their local authority child employment and entertainment officer, who, as will be seen from below, can have limited working hours and support.

## **2. Better funding and training for those dealing with child performer and chaperone licensing applications at local authority level.**

Participants argued that local authorities were well intentioned in their enforcement of child performer and chaperone licensing regulations, staffing often stopped the system working efficiently. Ed Magee from the NNCEE is working hard to raise standards and consistency among local authorities in England, but he acknowledges that *“with most local authorities the child employment officer is usually somebody who works part time, does something else as well as their child employment job” ... “I know there is one borough in London that when the child employment officer goes off on holiday, nobody gets a licence”*. Some councils are so under pressure that they are asking prospective chaperones to obtain their own DBS check, which would not be to the required level, and then those chaperones may go on to use that unsuitable check to work elsewhere, *“so(the TV production company) think that their chaperone is going to safeguard those children and actually, the sound assistant has probably got a better DBS than the chaperone”* (Rachael Fullerton).

Adelle Moss concurs *“in my local authority, where I live, I know that that local officer does not work on a Monday. So, if I were to put a location in Bedford on a Monday, I know that it will NOT be inspected.”* (Adelle Moss). Sarah De Souza recalls a three week wait in confirming if a prospective chaperone who had moved from one local authority to another to be licensed was under investigation for *“inappropriate behaviour”* at their previous authority. If DCMS is serious about creating quality TV and video content that harnesses the talents of children in the UK, and in this case, England, more funding is needed to make that system safe, efficient, and able to maximise opportunities.

Steve Ansell states that many of those training young actors within youth theatre are put off from providing more formal opportunities for young people through licensed shows and performances due to the costs and uncertainties involved in finding chaperones, and suggests a “means-tested fund” to support this, in addition to a central database.

## **3. Clearer regulation around agents**

Select committee members may be aware of the case of the convicted sex offender Jacky Jhaj, who used an agency to hire children to participate in a fake film premiere centred on himself in 2024. Adelle Moss noted that, “there was an agent, yes there was, and she licensed the children on his behalf, but she wasn’t aware either...But that’s how easy it is, because no-one ever checks who the applicant (for a performance license) is”. Many more agents are more thorough than this, and Adelle herself has set up the Agents of Young Performers Association (AYPA) to “establish a framework of professional practice when representing children and young performers across the entertainment industry” (AYPA, 2025).

Moreover, “*Anybody can set themselves up as an agent. I can be an agent tomorrow and start casting children. What to do about tax? What to do about National Insurance? What to do about investing money for the children?*” (Ed Magee). Adelle adds that becoming an agent is as easy as “*(setting) up a Facebook page, (setting) up a website, and going ‘I am now an agent’*”. Participants were in favour of more formal regulation for agents, involving training in child performer regulations and safeguarding, with perhaps compulsory enhanced DBS checks.

Ed further notes that inexperienced agents who, in Rachael Fullerton’s words “*don’t even need to know the regulations*”, can fail to spot cases where a child isn’t being paid properly by the production company, such as through misuse of a type of permission called “Body of Persons Approval (BOPA)” (NNCEE, 2025): “*And then as long as the child is not being paid they can have a Body of Persons (Approval), and we’ve seen an increase over the last few years of productions who are professional productions employing more children but not paying them*” (Ed Magee), whilst adult staff continue to be paid.

#### **4. Clarity on where social media influencers stand in terms of child performance legislation.**

The latest regulations related to child performers were issued over ten years ago, in 2014, and were widely consulted on at the time by industry experts, including some participants in our research. However, participants agreed that that legislation is “*starting to creak. It does not contain anything around social media and it’s a particular concern of ours and mine that there are children who are in the entertainment industry....that are completely outside the legislation*” (Ed Magee). There should therefore be clearer guidance on children who participate in the creation of online content for other children to ensure they are doing so fairly and safely, or at least a clearer statement of to what extent they fall within existing regulations.

Some specialist agents are approached by parents wanting to ensure they have proper permissions for social media “performances” in which payment to the child is through gifts or advertising revenue, but councils may respond by saying “*‘we need 21 days’ notice that you are going to take a picture of your child and put it on Instagram*”, and (the parents say) ‘well,

*I've already taken the picture' ... 'well, you can't put it up' "* (Adelle Moss). Here is another case where a centralised digital licensing system is suggested by participants as possible solution, though there are questions as to what degree it is possible to regulate content created so frequently

One odd contradiction is that if a child in England travels overseas for a social media related project and needs time off school, a magistrate must issue them permission to do so, and will usually inquire if anyone is profiting from the child's activities; whereas no such inquiries are made for a domestic project. In Adelle's words "*I asked the DfE, how is it that I can safeguard a social influencer (based on if anyone is profiting from their activities under a magistrate-issued overseas licence), when they step off our soil, but you can't cover it on our soil?*" (Adelle Moss).

## **Conclusion**

As can be seen from the above, systems for licensing child performers and their chaperones are in need of fairly urgent reform to ensure the safety and regional sustainability of the creation of quality children's TV and video content, especially considering the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's investment in the regional creative industries (DCMS, 2025), and the recent rapid growth of the screen industries in regions such as Yorkshire and the Humber (Screen Industries Growth Network, 2025).

The issue of how to define and regulate children's video content by children on social media should no doubt involve extensive further consultation (eg. with the work of Hudders and Beuckels, 2024 and Rees, 2025). Meanwhile, we would urge the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport to advocate for clearer regulation for agents working with child performers, building on the good work of the AYPAs, and to ensure that existing DfE guidelines are properly mobilised with the aid of a centralised, digital system accessible to all those with an interest in safeguarding and ensuring opportunity for children.

The Department for Education currently oversees child performer licensing as a devolved issue in England, so there are clearly large omissions from this evidence in relation to children's TV and video content production in other nations. However, in light of the concerns raised by participants it may also be worth considering the governance of child performance more broadly; whether the issue of child performer and chaperone licensing should be a concern for the DCMS instead of DfE, or at least singular body for the whole of the UK to facilitate safe opportunity and mobility for children working within children's TV and video content.

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