

STAGE

Child protection is under inspection

The safety of children must always take precedence over any wish of their families and others to see them appear on the stage. Yet the system in force to supervise the licensing of young performers appears paradoxically both obstructive to the needs of the profession while failing to offer anything like efficient protection.

Research garnered by Stagecoach Theatre Arts, courtesy of the Freedom of Information Act, reveals the scale of local authority inertia and incompetence. Thousands of licences have been granted – yet just one in 90 sampled has been subject to proper checks.

If the presumption is that potential threats to children arise from the workplace, then it is the individual producer who should be the focus of regulation rather than any particular young performer.

For the local authority the job would then be made easier. Is the producer approved? If so, then by and large they should receive assent to hire. If not, then they merit a blanket refusal. All applications from one company on behalf of children residing in one council area can be dealt with faster – and better – as a single package.

From a political perspective it would also deny councils the opportunity to interfere with matters beyond their remit, for example, deciding applications on the basis of a well meaning but censorious attitude to professional entertainment. Not only does this create a postcode lottery, it also functions indirectly as a restraint on trade.

Not so certain, though laudable, is the likelihood of success for Stagecoach's call for a ban on up-front fees and the registration of entertainment agents.

There might though be grounds to assert that existing child protection laws make this necessary for under-16s. While a cooling off period may allow adult professionals to take stock before parting with money, children and parents will have less experience on which to rely.

In some respects, the commendable work carried out by Stagecoach raises as many fears about the quality of government as it does about child protection.

One company, albeit large, has succeeded in providing information in place of conjecture as to how the system is working. After correctly concluding it is working very badly, Stagecoach has come up with a clear solution. What, one has to wonder, has the Department for Education and Skills been doing meantime?

stage talk