

Report on further work on the impact of COVID-19 on the arts

December 2020

Background

1. This report provides a summary of stakeholder comments from the workshop held on 15 October. A further session between the Chair and freelancers was held on 20 November and key themes from these discussions are incorporated in this report.
2. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee has focused its work on the impact of the pandemic on areas within its remit. This work has included a report on the [impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the arts sector](#).
3. On 15 October 2020 the Committee held virtual workshops with stakeholders from the arts sector. A further meeting between the Chair and freelancers working in the arts was held on 20 November. A range of individuals and organisations were represented including theatre and production companies, arts and cultural venues, representative bodies, the Urdd and National Eisteddfod, freelancers and academics. A full list of participants is available on our website.
4. This document summarises some of the key themes of the discussions and is a follow up to the Committee's [previous work on the impact of the COVID outbreak on the arts](#), details of which can be found on our website.



1. Key themes

Overall impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the arts

5. The impact of COVID-19 on the sector has been significant and wide-ranging not only from an economic perspective but also from a well-being perspective.
6. Many had hoped that the situation would have improved by now, but the sector envisages another bleak six months ahead. The main challenge will be keeping companies intact.
7. The sector has responded with remarkable collective action. This includes work from the Wales Cultural Alliance, the Freelance Taskforce and What Next? Cymru.

Participation and digital

8. Participation in the arts has been hit hard by the pandemic, and in many cases activity has come “to a complete stop”. The impact on youth arts participation in particular was described as “devastating”. It was noted that this will have an impact on the development of soft skills these young people would have otherwise learnt and potentially lead to talent being lost.

Digital participation

9. The pandemic has meant a shift to digital interaction. Whilst many in the sector have tried to diversify in order to work digitally, it was noted that this was a compromise and an attempt to make the best of a bad situation. It was felt that whilst people were able to access the arts digitally to a certain extent, the experience that they received was not the same. Furthermore concerns were raised about digital exclusion and the fact that many people do not have access to the internet needed to access online content.
 10. Other stakeholders highlighted that digital learning is also taking place but that it does not suit the needs of every participant. In terms of teaching music, concerns were raised that there is a postcode lottery in the approach. Teachers in certain areas have been allowed to teach but in other areas they have not.
 11. The need for government intervention to ensure equality of access to online/digital arts events was highlighted. It was felt that there is a strong need to provide support and financial assistance to those in the sector who lack the necessary skills and equipment to work digitally.
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Our view

We remain deeply concerned about the threat that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to the arts sector in Wales. Despite a brief respite over the summer, a second wave of the pandemic is taking place across Europe. It is clear from our engagement with stakeholders that the sector expects another difficult and uncertain time over the coming months during which the focus for many will be on survival.

Conclusion 1. We submit this summary of our engagement with the sector to the Welsh Government with the expectation that the Welsh Government will use its findings to inform its work in this area in the months ahead.

We note the shift to digital interaction and engagement necessitated by the pandemic and the concerns raised that this shift may disadvantage those without access to digital platforms.

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should update its digital strategy in light of the increased reliance on online platforms since the outbreak. With regards to the arts, it should be updated to reflect:

- the increase in digital consumption and delivery of the arts;
- the need for training for those who work in the arts to deliver and benefit from digital delivery; and
- the need to ensure equality of access to the arts online, including increasing broadband reliability upskilling those who are at risk from the 'digital divide'.

We also heard that there are potential inconsistencies relating to the teaching of music across Wales.

Recommendation 2. The Welsh Government should set out, in its response to this report, the arrangements and guidance for teaching music across Wales during the pandemic and its assessment of the effectiveness of those arrangements.

Live arts and music events

12. A range of issues relating to the holding of live arts events were raised during the virtual workshops including the impact of public health restrictions, consumer/public confidence, and financial risk.

Public confidence

13. Many stakeholders emphasised the need to get live events up and running again and to instil public confidence that attending events can be done safely.

14. There was a strong call to allow those in the sector to return to work so that they might begin the task of discovering ways to safely resume performances once more. It was felt that there needs to be clear instructions set by Government on how venues might re-open and that the Government should assist in rebuilding public confidence in attending cultural performances once more.

15. Reference was made to trial arts events held in the open air over the summer in conjunction with the Welsh Government. The trial events were deemed a success, therefore some stakeholders expressed their frustration at the failure to get live events back up and running.

16. Some participants noted that it would be helpful to have a clear indication from Government as to when it is believed that venues might open again. Although it was noted that such a target date could change depending on how the pandemic unfolds, stakeholders still felt it would be helpful to have a date in mind to work towards.

17. Event promoters have found themselves trapped in situation whereby they have to keep working to reschedule events – and so cannot claim government support – but due to the complete shutdown of the industry, do not have any new income.

Financial implications for live events

18. The financial risks associated with holding live events were a key concern during the workshops. Furthermore, difficulties in getting adequate insurance cover for live events that may have to be pulled due to COVID-19 were a concern.

19. Some participants called for a government-backed insurance scheme to help combat these concerns.

20. Fears were also expressed that Wales is losing both audiences and income to live events happening across the border in England. The very few events that have happened in Wales have featured the same acts: mainly bigger, more well-known acts which has left smaller artists out.

Advice and guidance from government

21. The need for clearer messages and guidance from the Welsh Government to venues, the public, and local authorities was emphasised. Many participants stated that there was some confusion as to what is and is not allowed. This is causing a lack of confidence in people to put on events and in people attending events, as they worry about safety.

22. It was felt that there needs to be a recognition that a “one size fits all” approach to cultural venues is not helpful. The needs and requirements of a small theatre company touring village halls, for example, are very different to those of an opera house. There needs to be a multi-faceted approach to getting venues open again and guidance set by government should reflect this.

23. There was also a sense that advice and support is currently targeted towards professional organisations to the detriment of community-based and amateur organisations. Some participants stated that community-based organisations felt “ignored”.

24. Looking ahead, advice and support should see professional and community organisations as part of the same “ecology”.

Our view

This stakeholder event was held before the announcement of a two-week firebreak lockdown in Wales and the deterioration of the public health situation. However, we also note the views expressed by stakeholders regarding the importance of public confidence and adequate insurance to reopening venues and restarting live events. Whilst we recognise that planning assumptions can be upended by the fast-moving nature of the pandemic, we agree that this should not preclude the Welsh Government from undertaking careful scenario planning with a view to re-starting arts and cultural activities safely in the near future.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should provide an update on its current thinking in terms of re-starting live arts and music events. This should include:

- a comparative assessment of the situation in Wales in relation to England;
- an outline of what assessment it has made on the potential for creating a timeline for reopening venues and enabling more outdoor live events, including a specific date to work towards.

In terms of the financial implications for live events, we note the repeated calls for a government-backed insurance scheme and have previously called on the Welsh Government to initiate talks with the Treasury on this matter.

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should update the Committee on the latest state of play in terms of its talks with the Treasury, and the insurance industry, on the creation of a government-backed insurance scheme.

We note the concerns of stakeholders that smaller, community organisations and venues feel overlooked in terms of Welsh Government guidance to date.

Conclusion 2. We expect the Welsh Government to ensure that the needs of smaller, community organisations are adequately reflected in any future guidance.

Support for the workforce

25. Furloughing through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has been very helpful, but this support is being withdrawn with no end to the pandemic in sight. There were considerable fears that this will lead to further job losses at the time of the session, however, on 31 October the UK Government announced that the Job Retention Scheme would be extended until Spring 2021.

26. Continued support for the workforce was seen as key, alongside calls for an extension of tax relief including VAT.

27. Many participants, including in our session with freelancers, spoke of the emotional toll that the pandemic is having on people in the sector. It was suggested that the pandemic may have long-lasting, negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people.

Support for freelancers

- 28.** There were wide-ranging concerns about the support offered to freelancers – who were described as “the lifeblood of the sector”.
- 29.** Many felt that the funding given to freelancers has not been substantial enough and was not distributed as quickly as it should have been.
- 30.** Furthermore, there was a feeling that the way that grants had been distributed was ineffective. The “first come, first served” style of distribution was unfair and there were problems in accessing the website when the grants opened. The process was described as “a scramble” and was in one instance compared to “the lottery” of trying to secure a ticket for the Glastonbury festival.
- 31.** There was a strong sense that a fairer system needs to be put in place for distributing grants and that funding left unallocated in some local authority areas should be re-allocated to other local areas where demand has outstripped the funding available.
- 32.** The need for a better understanding of how many freelancers there are in the sector and where they are based was also highlighted. It was felt that this was vital to ensuring effective planning and grant distribution going forward.

Our view

We welcome the extension of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme until Spring 2021.

Freelancers working in the sector have been hit hard by the pandemic. In terms of support for freelancers, we share the concerns expressed to us that the initial distribution method was unfair and created anxiety for individuals looking to access funding.

Phase one of this funding went live on 5 October 2020. It was distributed on a first-come, first-served basis, and in some areas (e.g. Cardiff) it was fully-subscribed within an hour.

Given the difficulties with the first tranche of funding, and the feedback from stakeholders, we wrote to the Deputy Minister on 20 October requesting that the Welsh Government learn lessons from the first tranche of funding and to increase the amount of funding available to freelancers in the sector. These calls were repeated during the Committee’s debate on Impact of COVID-19 on the Creative Industries on 11 November.

The Deputy Minister responded on 11 December setting out a list of actions that had been taken to improve the package of support for freelancers in the sector, which included additional funding.

We also heard that a lack of data on the number of freelancers working in Wales has hindered the Welsh Government's ability to respond to the pandemic.

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government should set out in its response to this report what assessment it has made of the number of freelancers in Wales and whether the current level of support provided is sufficient. The response should include details of the quantitative data gathered.

Impact on individuals and communities

33. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on specific communities was a key theme.

Impact on the BAME community

34. One of the communities disproportionately impacted is the BAME community. There was a sense from the workshops that Wales was already trailing behind in terms of engagement with the BAME community, and that this had been exacerbated by the pandemic.

35. How arts organisations move ahead with the need to improve engagement with diverse audiences and communities was seen as a key challenge after the pandemic.

Impact on the Welsh language

36. The implications of the pandemic for the Welsh language are being acutely felt. In particular it was noted that the cessation of Welsh language arts events had had a damaging effect on Welsh language education and on Welsh speaking communities.

37. It was further noted that Welsh language cultural events play a vital part in keeping Welsh speakers connected and the loss of Welsh language events such as Eisteddfodau was hard felt. Welsh language cultural organisations like the Eisteddfod felt that it would be several years before they are able to “bounce back” to a pre-COVID state.

38. The implications for the Welsh Government's wider aims, and its target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 were also highlighted.

Community-based organisations

39. Some stakeholders expressed concerns that community-based organisations such as choirs and community arts groups had been ignored and that the government had concentrated too heavily on the professional sector.

40. In keeping with the need for clear communication and guidance for community-based organisations there was a sense that the principle of delegating funding to community organisations at a local level was important.

Our view

We note the negative impact of the pandemic on specific communities in Wales and are clear that every effort must be made by government to mitigate this impact.

In terms of the BAME community, how the arts sector engages with diverse audiences and communities will be a key challenge in future and these considerations must be taken forward as part of any planning for after the pandemic.

The implications for the Welsh language are also significant with the pandemic bringing about the loss of many opportunities for individuals to enjoy and participate in Welsh language arts and culture.

Furthermore, community-based organisations expressed their sense that the focus of government activity so far has been too heavily focused on the professional sector. The arts belong to everyone, from the grassroots level through to the elite level. As a Committee we expect every effort to be made to ensure that community-based organisations are adequately represented, and their needs reflected, in government planning for post-pandemic recovery.

Response by the Welsh and UK governments

41. There was general support for the way in which the Welsh Government and the Arts Council had dealt with the impact of the pandemic so far, however there were concerns including that the funding allocated to date would not be enough.

42. An overarching observation made in terms of the impact of the pandemic on the arts and cultural organisations was the fact that those organisations and venues that are least dependent on public funding have been hardest hit.

43. A number of participants expressed anger and dismay at recent messages regarding the need to retrain that had been issued at the UK level and which had been circulated on social media. Participants emphasised the need to approach the challenges currently being faced sympathetically.

Financial support by government

44. There were concerns about the speed at which financial support had been provided to the sector with some participants arguing that Wales was behind England in terms of its announcements.

45. Furthermore a number highlighted the continuing uncertainty about finances from April 2021 onwards. Any early indications that the Welsh Government are able to give in terms of financial support for the next financial year would be greatly welcomed by the sector.

Our view

We recognise the difficult circumstances faced by government in responding to this unprecedented pandemic and welcome the support that has been provided in many areas.

Financial support for the sector is key – and it is especially painful for the sector that those organisations who rely least on public funding are now being hit the hardest by the near total shutdown of activity within the sector.

There is a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty among the sector about what the size and scope of the financial support will be for the next financial year 2021-22 and any reassurances that can be given should be made by the Welsh Government at the earliest opportunity.

Conclusion 3. We will keep a watching brief in this area as part of our general scrutiny of the Welsh Government on areas within our remit, and as part of our scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2021-22, which is expected to be laid before the Senedd on 21 December 2020.

Recovery and the future

46. It should be noted that continuing uncertainty and the emergence of a second wave of the pandemic across Europe were the backdrop to discussions when looking ahead to the future.

47. Furthermore, a number noted that the added dimension of Brexit and the uncertainty about the eventual outcome, whether there is a deal or not, heaping additional challenges on the sector.

Collaboration

48. Many welcomed the collaboration fostered during the pandemic and expressed hope that this would continue into the future.

49. Furthermore, stakeholders welcomed the opportunity to talk with the Senedd and felt that more engagement between government and those working in the sector would be beneficial.

50. A key message from the workshops was regarding the need for government and others to not simply 'consult' but to 'cooperate' with stakeholders across the sector.

51. Some participants argued that a more porous space for discussions with Arts Council is required. There was a feeling that bigger organisations received the focus whilst smaller ones struggled to be a part of the discussions.

52. Building better links between the professional and voluntary sector was also seen as a key aim for the future. It was felt that the industry was moving in the right direction prior to the pandemic and that organisations are moving to a more community-centred way of working but that the pandemic has accelerated this process.

53. The importance of global/international collaboration was also emphasised. With the arts sector facing the additional challenges of Brexit in the near future, these international links will be more important than ever as thoughts turn to recovery from the pandemic.

Innovation

54. Many stressed the innovation and resilience of the sector in finding creative solutions to challenges.

55. Some participants highlighted the fact that the Arts Council of England have held talks with big organisations such as a Google to seek ways of working digitally. It was felt that this is something that the Arts Council of Wales and the Welsh Government should explore further.

Role in helping physical and mental well-being

56. The role of the arts in promoting better physical and mental well-being was emphasised during the discussions. This important role that the arts have to play should be central to planning ahead for future recovery of the sector in Wales.

Our view

The arts sector in Wales is innovative and resilient and it was encouraging to hear some positive examples of collaboration and engagement. However, this is clearly a very difficult time for almost every aspect of our economy and society, not least the arts sector in Wales.

Constructive and meaningful engagement between the sector and government (including the Arts Council) must continue as we weather the storm of the pandemic in the months that lie ahead. We would also note the report of the Wales Freelance Taskforce on strategies to support arts and performance freelancers¹ as evidence of the need for constructive engagement where possible.

We note the additional challenges that Brexit will bring to the sector and agree that future international collaboration should play a key part in the vision for post-pandemic recovery.

Recommendation 6. The Welsh Government should outline its latest thinking in terms of post-pandemic recovery planning. This should include:

- its latest assessment of how Brexit will impact the sector and what steps it is taking to manage these impacts;
- how the Welsh Government intends to continue engagement with the sector including engagement with smaller, grassroots and community organisations; and
- whether it has any ideas or examples of best practice from elsewhere in terms of effective innovation with partner organisations and how these will inform recovery planning.

¹ [Rebalancing and Reimagining](#) – Wales Freelance Taskforce