

Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee

Ymchwiliad i'r achosion o COVID-19 ac effaith y feirws ar ddiwylliant, y diwydiannau creadigol, treftadaeth, cyfathrebu a chwaraeon / Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport

CWLC COV24

Ymateb gan Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Conwy / Response from Conwy County Borough Council

Welsh Parliamentary Inquiry: response re culture, heritage and the creative industries

- **What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?**
- **How effectively has the support provided by the Welsh Government, the UK Government and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?**
- **What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?**
- **What lessons can be learnt from how the Welsh Government, the UK Government, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?**
- **How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can the Welsh Government support such innovation to deal with future challenges?**

Culture/heritage/creative industries – Conwy County Borough Council

The immediate impact of Covid-19 was the closure of all face-to-face public services, with libraries being the last buildings to close on 21 March.

Library and Information staff have been redeployed to a new Community Support Service which provides help to those who are shielded or in self-isolation. The service has also maintained and enhanced the online offer and inter-activity available to customers, including Facebook. Year on year increase of our e-audio collection in April was +147% and e-book collection +133%.

The new flagship building for culture and heritage for Conwy, Conwy Culture Centre, opened its library, heritage interpretation and arts displays in December 2019. The library at the Centre opened in December and following a short period of closure whilst moving from the old site, had re-established and flourished in the new location. The attendance at events for story-time and Welsh learner sessions for example was excellent. The Archive Service had moved its staff and collections in and was about to open to the public when Covid-19 hit. Staff have been working from home on accreditation and other back office work as well as answering public enquiries where they can and increasing social media activity dramatically. Some staff have been released for redeployment to essential services; overall the range of services that can be provided has been reduced hugely.

All outreach events have also been cancelled. This has particularly affected the arts programme, all of whose workshops and exhibitions have been cancelled, along with the huge drop in physical audiences to all galleries. Conwy's independent museums are all closed. For Llandudno Museum this has meant having to halt construction work during a major refurbishment project which has put back the reopening of the museum for at least 3 months, missing the projected summer footfall.

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Volunteering has virtually ceased although digital volunteering opportunities are being urgently developed. However some of the independent museums such as the Sir Henry Jones Museum in Llangernyw and Penmaenmawr Museum have an elderly volunteer base who lack confidence and skills in taking up such opportunities.

The historic built environment sector has been unable to progress with development work due not only to the general lockdown but specifically there have also been instances where statutory consultees, such as Cadw, have been unable to carry out site visits, and this has impacted on the planning application process.

Conwy's theatres, Venue Cymru and Theatr Colwyn, are closed. In Conwy, our theatres earn 80% of their income through ticket sales, secondary spend and hire income. This income disappeared overnight. Alongside shows and conferences, our venues also run an extensive outreach programme. We moved quickly to offer our participants creative opportunities online both through their existing groups and with the development of a new project, YsCWL, designed to support home schooling. The digital programmes have enabled us to provide small commissions for the many freelance creative practitioners that we work with who have seen their incomes drop to virtually nothing. Our digital programmes have also enabled us to stay in contact with particularly vulnerable members of our community who benefit from the schemes that we run. Whilst our outreach work has been, at least in part, moved to digital provision we are not able to replicate our main programme of performances. As a presenting house, we do not have work available to stream online. We attract around 200,000 people annually to live events; this provision for these people has completely stopped with no viable replacement available.

Venue Cymru has been transformed into a field hospital, Ysbyty Enfys Llandudno. A number of our staff were heavily involved in the work to reconfigure the building and some staff continue to support the hospital with facilities management and catering provision. It is possible that other theatres may be able to reopen sooner than Venue Cymru can as we wait for confirmation that the hospital is no longer needed, and then for the decommissioning work to take place.

Whilst we are proud to support our local health board and to serve our community in such an important way, any delay in reopening will be of concern to us. In 2019 and early 2020 we undertook a major programme of improvement works at Venue Cymru to help us meet the needs of the conference industry. Phase two of this enhancement project will see improvements to our theatre auditorium and foyers, work that is long overdue and which is desperately needed if we are to retain audiences in the future. The work we have planned will include replacement of our auditorium seating and increased foyer spaces. Clearly this ambition has become a vital element of ensuring that audiences are not confined to tight spaces whilst in our building. We are now concerned that, having been closed for such a long period of time, we will damage our business even further if we have to close again to carry out the work needed. We would very much like to carry out this project during the hospital decommissioning period in order to maximise our appeal to audiences on reopening, improve circulation space and to prevent us having to close again in the near future. We will need help with funding in order to achieve this.

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The most immediate support that has been offered by Welsh Government is the Cultural Resilience Fund. The Culture and Information Section, within which culture and heritage sits in Conwy, submitted a grant application to fund a digital hub for culture and heritage in Conwy. Unfortunately this application was unsuccessful. This was particularly disappointing as the kind of support we most urgently need, that which would allow us to refocus our offer to the digital, is not eligible for support from other funders' emergency schemes such as that provided by the National Heritage Lottery Fund.

Funding for each library service in Wales has been approved in order to develop a new call and collect service and prepare buildings for customers to visit again. We are progressing with the planning and required risk assessments for this.

For theatre the most immediate support received was from the Arts Council of Wales, who have been flexible with our existing lottery grant which has enabled us to continue with our outreach work online. We are also grateful to BBC Children in Need who have also been supportive and flexible with their grant requirements. The theatre industry requires a large number of staff and this is the greatest element of our theatres budget. We have furloughed the majority of our Front of House Services and Technical staff. This reduction in pressure on budgets has been very welcome. We are also extremely grateful for the Welsh Government scheme to mitigate losses that Local Authorities have incurred due to Covid-19.

Advice in the form of guidelines has been received from Welsh Government for libraries and UK guidance via Libraries Connected was circulated on June 5th.

Advice has begun to become available from The National Archives, and advice applicable to the sector from WG and the UK Government is emerging rapidly also, and is keenly sought in a situation where lack of guidance could risk lives and not just heritage or art collections.

The most immediate long term impact on both Conwy's heritage and its arts will be the huge drop in physical audiences to archives, museums, galleries and related outreach events. At present it seems likely that there will be a sustained period in which physical access to venues and services will be limited by social distancing. Conwy has a number of smaller venues such as the independent museums for whom social distancing will be a challenge. For the Culture Centre and all other venues, interpretation and resources involving physical touch will be problematic. The Culture Centre has various pieces of such interpretation, virtually new and unexplored.

For libraries, book and stock browsing is a challenge owing to quarantining issues (each item that is touched needs to be quarantined), as is ensuring the safety of computer users. Plans for safe customer flow through the reader-friendly designed libraries are difficult. We are supported by our Facilities and Health and Safety colleagues in temporarily redesigning layout.

Staff have immediately taken up the challenge to convert as many as possible of their services and outreach activities to digital, and the crisis has allowed much innovation to happen with initial thoughts on how to deliver outreach to schools, community groups and

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digital volunteering opportunities being investigated and rapidly planned within weeks. This could be a positive impact in the long term with services and collections reaching new audiences locally, nationally and even internationally. In better times, with minimal or no social distancing necessary, these new enhanced digital services could run alongside the conventional offer.

For the independent museums in Conwy, even a return to public access with social distancing is problematic as they are run by elderly volunteers likely to be wary of social interaction for longer than the majority of the population.

Less positively, with the economy likely to be in a severe recession for some time, Conwy heritage and culture is vulnerable to both potential local authority spending cuts and the drying up of grant funding from WG and all other funders. Conwy heritage and culture has become very reliant on grant money to be able to carry out much non-core activity.

For arts in Conwy, the impact on freelance artists we work with will be severe in the long term. Not all artists are able to convert their work to a digital realm and with no paid events and sessions, income levels will not be at a sustainable level. The longer the situation continues the higher the chance that our artists and creative practitioners will leave the sector and seek work elsewhere.

With regard to theatres, we are keenly aware that they will likely be the last to reopen. Whilst great strides are being made to reopen most customer-facing services with distancing measures in place, it is clear that these measures will make live theatre unsustainable. Theatre and entertainment cannot survive with a drastic drop in seating capacities. Working on current guidelines we would only be able to sell around 20% of our seats; we generally work on 50% - 70% capacity to break even. The confidence of our audiences in returning to enclosed auditoria also needs to be taken into consideration. We are working hard, across the UK, to devise new models of working that will provide a safe environment for our audiences and a financially viable methodology for both ourselves and for the producing companies that we work with. It is vitally important that the theatre industry recovers as soon as possible; Venue Cymru alone has a regional economic impact of up to £33.5 million annually. Many hotels, shops, restaurants and transport companies rely on us having a busy and successful programme. We need support to keep our venues and our creative practitioners solvent until such time as we can return to full capacities in our auditoria. We need support to develop new ways of working. We need financial help to adjust our buildings should this be necessary. We need production companies and creative practitioners to be supported to ensure that we have work to present on our stages. It is clear that the recovery process for our industry will take many months as production companies re-establish and audiences regain confidence in attending mass gatherings. As such, when we reopen, theatres will need support to market our work and to encourage visitors back to us.

Lessons learnt

The First Minister's announcement about planning to reopen libraries took everyone by surprise and the guidance for safe reopening of services will not be available until some

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weeks after the announcement. We were pleased to hear that Welsh Government officers are now talking to colleagues in England with regard to a Service Recovery Toolkit.

Opportunities for more joint work has been missed e.g. joint procurement of essential items for a phased reopening, such as bags needed for a call and collect service. Risk assessment templates could have been provided to be adapted by each local authority.

The kind of support that WG could provide to Conwy heritage and culture to help with these long term impacts is financial and promotional. Financial assistance in the form of additional grants to further support services would be very helpful as they have to continue a rapid reshaping of services to become either digital or socially distanced. A grant scheme to support staff, and possibly volunteer training, would also be of assistance as new equipment to move services in a digital direction will not be able to be used to best effect if staff/volunteers are not confident in using it. Promotional help in the form of marketing campaigns for Welsh heritage/culture that Conwy could join to promote services as they reopen would also be of assistance. Training for freelance artists in delivering online workshops and also digital content would be really beneficial in allowing creative practitioners to stay in the sector.

Conwy's culture and heritage sector has learnt lessons on new aspects of disaster and service recovery planning that will influence new planning long into the future. The urgent need to turn services digital has seen innovation at a pace that would not have been contemplated or possible before. Lessons have also been learnt on the extent of work that can be done from home and on remote team working, which makes full-time on site working for anyone not offering a frontline physical service unnecessary.

Conwy's culture and heritage sectors for future resilience will need to evolve into a far more hybrid physical/digital model, rather than primarily a physical model with some digital aspects as in the past, and will need good planning in place that allows services to move between the two. WG can assist this both with targeted funding as described above and also with guidance/standard setting from MALD. The accreditation schemes for both archives and museums will need amendment to reflect the change.

Library services appreciate the change in the Welsh Government reporting template for the Welsh Public Library Standards 2019-20 and hope that a similar slimmed-down model will be required of services in 2020-21, and that much of the data will not be benchmarked, as we are no longer in comparative positions for year-on-year or authority to authority.

Venue Cymru and Theatr Colwyn are members of UK Theatre, and are signed up to industry requests for a new Emergency Rescue Fund and Long-term Loan or Cultural Investment Participation Scheme, and also request a collection of extensions or revisions to existing policy namely a sectoral extension of the Job Retention Scheme at 80% until at least October; an extension or replacement of the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme; temporary modifications to the Theatre Production Tax Relief for three years, and a review of insurance and liability policy in light of the new risks of reopening, to allow access by the Sector to appropriate insurance.