

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 COV28

Ymateb gan National Theatre Wales/ Response from National Theatre Wales

## **Submission to Welsh Parliament's Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport - from National Theatre Wales**

### **Introduction – about National Theatre Wales**

National Theatre Wales is an internationally-recognised theatre producing company and one of Wales' National Arts Companies. We operate from a small base in Cardiff but work all over Wales. Because we do not have a venue, earned income is a much lesser part of our income than for many theatre companies and Arts Council Wales' funding makes up the majority of our income. Because of this we have not taken advantage of any of the UK or Welsh Government's assistance schemes during the Covid-19 period.

### **What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?**

The impact of Covid-19 on the Theatre sector has been immediate and extremely severe. By 17 March more than 80% of theatres had closed. All theatres – including those who receive public subsidy, are reliant on ticket sales for their income. Without a ticket-buying public going to theatres, the sector has lost the vast majority of its income. The freelance cohort within the theatre sector – including actors, producers, directors, musicians, technicians, craftspeople and more - has also been devastated by an instant cessation of the majority of their work as the theatres closed. The performing arts sector (of which the theatre sector is a subset) will be one of the last to return to work owing to its work being reliant on mass gatherings.

Whilst some producing companies (including National Theatre Wales) are still continuing to work, producing digital content for their audiences and providing vital job opportunities to support some of the sector's freelancers, there will still be significant medium to long term adverse impacts on their work. In the case of some theatre venues, there is an immediate threat to their very existence.

The theatre sector plays a vital part in the economic, social and cultural well-being of the communities it serves. The sector provides education and training in schools and communities; it plays a crucial role in tackling issues around physical and mental health, social isolation and loneliness – the effects of which are particularly prevalent in older and rural populations exacerbated heavily by this prolonged period of lockdown and ongoing shielding requirements.

We would respectfully recommend that the Select Committee reads the document submitted to the DCMS by UK Theatre, Society of London Theatre, Creu Cymru, Federation of Scottish Theatres and

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 COV28

Ymateb gan National Theatre Wales/ Response from National Theatre Wales

Theatre and Dance Northern Ireland. This gives a detailed picture of the effect of Covid-19 on the theatre sector in the UK and National Theatre Wales thoroughly endorses its contents.

## **How effectively has the support provided by the Welsh Government, the UK Government and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?**

The support currently being offered by UK and Welsh Government is doing much to alleviate the immediate and catastrophic impact on the sector. However, there are still many parts of the sector which fall through the net.

The UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is being used by the majority of the theatre sector and has proved effective in keeping those organisations using it alive. The key question is what happens when staff are no longer able to be furloughed, but people are not yet permitted to attend "mass gatherings". For many theatre companies, the financial proportion that is being asked of them to pay themselves from August is likely to lead to bankruptcy. The sector is therefore campaigning strongly for furloughing to be retained until theatres can open fully again.

The UK government's Self-Employed Support Scheme (SEISS) is welcome, but there are still many freelancers who cannot access it – in particular those who are run limited companies (which are too small for other government support, but also don't qualify for the SEISS), those who have recently graduated and the many in the sector with portfolio careers.

Most organisations in the sector are not eligible for the Bank of England's Covid-19 Corporate Financing Facility, and most are not accessing the loan scheme as Boards are not risking taking on debt at this uncertain time (many UK theatre organisations are charitable bodies).

The Arts Council Wales Arts Resilience Fund, aimed at getting the arts sector through the crisis and back on its feet is very welcome. However, despite being well-thought out, the Fund still does not reach many who work for smaller community-based organisations, as although they are a part of the ecology, they are ineligible for the schemes. Arts Council Wales have also stated clearly that the funds can only be accessed by those with the most urgent need. As the crisis continues to hold, and if the ban on mass gatherings is not lifted, there will inevitably be more and more organisations whose needs will be considered urgent. It is also worrying that Arts Council Wales have had to reprioritise funding from other strands of its work towards the Resilience Fund. This in itself will have an adverse effect on the sector in the medium term as those funds will not be available in the future.

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 COV28

Ymateb gan National Theatre Wales/ Response from National Theatre Wales

## **What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?**

Social distancing is severely affecting theatre organisations' business models. If it has to continue for a significant length of time, this in turn will have a significant impact on the theatre sector. Theatre is all about the communal experience and even if some theatres (very few) could afford to put on socially distanced work, the impact, value and reach of that work is likely to be reduced as a result. Even when theatres can reopen as normal, audience confidence is likely to be severely affected, particularly amongst the older population. The impact of Covid-19 also threatens the education, skills and diversity in the sector; having relatively recently made some improvements in its diversity (though considerably less so in Wales than in England) many are worried that a lower risk appetite could lead to that progress being halted. It is also clear that those with protected characteristics are far more badly affected by the crisis than those without. Those whose skills are transferable across sectors are likely to leave the theatre sector leading to increased skills shortages in certain areas.

The immediate and medium term need is to ensure that the UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the Self-Employed Support Scheme are continued for the performing arts sector, at least until theatres can play to full capacity audiences again. We cannot stress the importance of this enough.

It is worth looking abroad at the various different packages of support that some countries have offered. The New Zealand recovery measures are particularly interesting and can be found using this link. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/417843/government-launches-175m-arts-and-music-recovery-package>

## **What lessons can be learnt from how the Welsh Government, the UK Government, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?**

The instruction from UK Government for people to "avoid" going to theatres was extremely unhelpful with regard to the insurance position. Warning should have been given to the sector that there would be an expectation to close, enabling preparation and planning for a response to the instruction when it came. This would have led to less stress and uncertainty.

The communications from Welsh Government, Arts Council Wales and Arts Council England have been very clear. That has not always been the case with the UK Government.

There was not enough recognition upfront of the army of freelancers who make up the fundamental part of various industries. The responses came eventually, but this could have been quicker.

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 COV28

Ymateb gan National Theatre Wales/ Response from National Theatre Wales

## **How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can the Welsh Government support such innovation to deal with future challenges?**

There is no doubt that the theatre sector will emerge fundamentally changed from its existing form pre-Covid. The cliché of the “new normal” has become a cliché for a reason. To survive and thrive into the future, the sector needs to pay even more attention to the breadth and diversity of the audience it reaches, the diversity of its workforce and the relevance of its work. Many in the sector have increased their use of technology exponentially, whether that is the quick adaptation to working remotely, the use of Zoom to teach or the increase in digitally captured and distributed work. What is heartening is that the sector has once again shown itself to be both hugely creative and adaptable. The continued use of technology will be very important as we move forward; for example it is likely that fewer people will work from physical offices in the future. However, the importance of the live experience must be maintained. It would be interesting, as part of a recovery package, and in the short term, to introduce an R & D/innovation fund to help with new ways of working with socially distanced arts.

One of the biggest issues in the sector, and in many other sectors in Wales, is the lack of diversity in the workforce. The Welsh Government needs to help the sector tackle this; there are many angles to this issue, some of which the sector and individual organisations within it can tackle such as adapting recruitment methods, developing more inclusive companies, and more diverse Boards. Some issues however need government action and intervention; for example how we encourage young people with diverse backgrounds that the arts is a serious career choice, needs a coordinated approach across schools and colleges.

The arts feed substantially into the wider creative industries, a sector producing some of Wales' greatest success stories; the arts not only bring great economic benefit to Wales but they play a significant role in 'nation building' and put our country on the map. Theatre and the arts bring people together in shared experiences that create connections, and develop partnerships and practices that in some cases can be transformational for individuals and communities as well as national identity and pride. Co-creation and community-led arts practices can initiate reconnection and social touch points in a variety of creative ways as we emerge from this crisis; government and arms-length agencies should create opportunities for the arts sector to become a primary force to encourage people to reflect and reintegrate post-Covid. Structured funding to enable this activity, and to build capacity within communities would generate both economic and social activity as well as physical and mental therapy in local contexts and communities. Social isolation is a scourge of present day society and its adverse effects will have increased during the crisis. Funds to prioritise interconnectedness and overcome isolation should be made available for the arts; this would be

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 COV28

Ymateb gan National Theatre Wales/ Response from National Theatre Wales

wholly in line with the Wellbeing of Future Generations legislation, would aid recovery from Covid-19 and contribute to our emerging from this crisis as a more humane and engaged society.