

Written evidence submitted by Hardish Virk

I was born to parents who had arrived in the UK from India in the late Sixties. They made home in Coventry and it was the community of artists who welcomed them. It helped that my parents were artists (father was a writer and mother was a visual artist who went onto becoming a published writer and radio broadcaster). However, this community was more than just a forum of artists sharing their art, it was also a haven for newly arrived ethnic communities finding a home and solidarity in a new country. This social, health and well-being impact of creative communities has underpinned my work over the last 30 years.

I began my career as an artist and over the last two decades I have been consulting arts and cultural organisations on audience, professional and organisational development. During this time, I have seen the cultural landscape change and become stronger even when facing challenging times. However, the current crisis in response to Covid-19 is unlike anything I have experienced in my lifetime and the very fabric of the creative sector is under threat. A sector which has demonstrated time after time that it brings communities together, feeds local economies and produces some of the world's greatest art and culture. Without it, the UK will become one of the poorest arts and cultural countries in the world.

Since theatres and other public arts spaces have closed in response to Covid-19, I am aware of the threat of these spaces never opening again or coming out of this crisis way after many other public spaces due to the public's anxiety of being in a space with large numbers in close proximity. This is understandable and in many ways we need to continue to be vigilant, even after the lockdown has come to an end but there needs to be a lifeline to theatres, arts centres, music venues, museums, galleries, libraries, festivals and the artists and freelancers that underpin the creative sector.

The creative sector is a community which relies on each other to survive, grow, and succeed. As a freelancer I can only exist and operate in a sector which is thriving as otherwise the work is not available. There has been emergency funds made available by Arts Council England and individual financial packages made available across the country and even though these opportunities are welcomed, many don't really address the needs of the wider community of freelancers who work within this sector as the focus is on the artist and not for example, the marketing or audience development consultant. And this population makes up a significant percentage of freelancers working in the creative sector. If there is no work or buildings to promote, then the jobs are less likely to be available for marketers for example. Of course, these are changing times but current audience surveys suggest there is some reluctance for the public to head back to theatres and other similar spaces after the lockdown has been relaxed so we could be in this climate of uncertainty for a long time. The government's Self-employment Income Support Scheme will be welcomed by a large community of freelancers but will not benefit those who have become self-employed in 2019. And the financial support is being made available in June 2020 when many freelancers will have probably used up their reserves by the end of April 2020.

Moving forward, I am recommending that there is greater value, respect and investment in the creative industries so that they are not only resilient during challenging times like the current Covid-19 pandemic but also during normal operational times so that the sector can support cross-sector partnerships more affectively and engage the wider public in the arts and the role it plays in relation to health and well-being. In addition, the freelance community needs greater protection in terms equity, jobs, and insurances. There continues to be inequalities in the creative sector in relation to lack of diversity and representation at a decision-making level and who benefits from public funding. This pandemic should be an opportunity to not only support a more resilient sector and everyone who works within it but to also respond affectively to creating a more equal culture of participation and growth.

However, in the short-term financial investment needs to be considerably increased to support not only Arts Council England but directing support to smaller independent businesses and freelancers who do not benefit from institutional funding streams. This can support the lifeline of these smaller businesses whilst respecting the value of these and the wider community of creatives and arts organisations. This will require a shift in mind-sets so that central government views the creative industries with the same respect and value as banks, for example.

This is not a detailed response but a summary of observations, experiences, and recommendations.