

Written evidence submitted by Curious Minds

The impact of Covid-19 on the cultural education sector* in the NW of England

**specifically the freelancers and the smaller organisations that fall outside of Arts Council England's portfolio*
28/4/2020

This paper is submitted by Caz Brader, Deputy CEO of Curious Minds, a charity in the North West of England. Our primary purpose is to provide sector support to the schools, youth workers, artists and arts/organisations who collectively make up the Cultural Education sector. Much of work is funded through Arts Council England. We aim to ensure children and young people have access to great art and culture and opportunities to live and learn creatively.

1. What has been the immediate impact?

1.1 Curious Minds has, at the time of writing, gathered evidence from 179 freelancer professionals and 49 smaller, community organisations who work in the Cultural Education sector and feel their work and lives have been immediately and adversely affected by the Covid-19 crisis.

These freelance professionals work largely on short term contracts in schools, youth centres, and community projects and on behalf of larger arts and cultural organisations and venues.

The organisations we heard from are those without core funding (from Arts Council England for example), whose business models are often based on short term revenue generation from fees, project funding and commissions.

These individuals and organisations use creativity, art and culture to work with children and young people. Predominantly they do this to improve social outcomes for children and young people, often for some of the most vulnerable young people.

Those surveyed included organisations who provide creativity and support for young people in areas of poverty, children in hospitals, young people who have been excluded from school, young carers, and young people with disabilities. Artistic outcomes in this work are always evident and often excellent, but frequently the art form is the 'journey' rather than the 'destination'.

1.2 The crisis has led to the immediate loss of income and contracts.

"Due to the recent Coronavirus crisis, in the immediate, all our delivery work has been halted, meaning a complete loss of income for the organisation. All work in schools was cancelled ... and subsequently, all community delivery and further education delivery has been cancelled"

"...at present we have no income at all, this is an extremely stressful time as we are a small company facing a very uncertain future due to enforced economic hardship brought on by the current crisis.."

Halted relationships and the diversion of future funding streams has led to huge uncertainty about their future survival.

“We have undertaken to continue paying our core staff for as long as possible. But with no additional funding coming in and the majority of projects having been postponed or cancelled, the charity is required to pay for this administrative work out of diminishing free reserves, a situation which can only be sustained for so long”

“At this point, we envisage not working until September/October, this will ultimately mean we'll close our doors”

“In normal circumstances and pre-covid our organisational plan was to sustain the success of both projects in securing additional grant funding through Arts Council England Project Grants which is now not possible”

- 1.3 During the last few years, these arts practitioners frequently find themselves working (or choose to work) in the space left by diminishing youth services, education services and social service providers. This is important to note because the impact of this crisis often removes not just access to an artform, a creative activity or a leisure pursuit, but access to the trusted adult who is supporting them to navigate life's challenges.

“As a result we are concerned that cyp with learning disabilities are going to miss out on the wide range of resources that are going to emerge in response to this crisis – both because of accessibility (language use in ways things are presented, “speed” of presentation etc) and in terms of skills and knowledge (particularly digital skills) required”

“We are not sure when, or if, our programmes will be allowed to continue in the future, and fear that our delivery, which relies on working at the bedside with children in need, maybe compromised for some time”

- 1.4 Where possible, these small organisations are attempting to move their support and activities online. Whilst there is some evidence of success here, there is more evidence that this is an inconsistent 'sticking plaster' that cannot be relied upon to tackle the most pressing challenges such as paying rent. It also highlights the digital inequality issue as many of the young people being supported do not have the presumed access to digital technology

“We have moved our offer online and asked for donations towards this but only 10% of our parents have continued to pay. We still have rent and bills to pay and we are trying to honour our payment commitments to our regular teachers who are young artists with no other remaining work”

There are some who maintain optimism about the learning that will take place

“Our business model and mode of delivery will need to dramatically shift during this time and we see this as a positive opportunity to strengthen the delivery options of our organisation for the future. We embrace the challenge of remaining human and connected, whilst we lose the ability to meet and move in person”

- 1.5 Despite the challenges, strong people-centred values are driving many decisions in our sector with a determination to provide support for young people and protect staff. But their ability to live out those values and implement that learning is hindered by the very real challenge of finance

“We are rapidly spending our limited reserves to honour these commitments”

2. How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government

Departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

- 2.1 There has been wide spread gratitude for the way in which Arts Council England and National Lottery Heritage Fund responded. With the flexibility offered being of most value.
The provision of emergency funds was also hugely valued, although, the time it takes to launch such opportunities did leave a gap, which we, as a smaller more nimble organisation attempted to fill for some in our sector.
- 2.2 There appeared to be a difference in both tone and approach between the DCMS and the DFE. With DFE appearing less generous and flexible. In the Cultural Education sector, we are often between the two (with Music Education Hubs being a good example) and this is one of many moments in time when more joined up communication between the two departments would have benefitted us.

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

- 3.1 Three examples of impact we foresee are
- I. Access to cultural venues (theatres, museums etc) looks likely to be affected for some time. Whilst this does not limit creativity, it limits experience. There are some children for whom formative first experiences (school or family visits to these venues) will be missed.
 - II. The impact of this on children and young people themselves, is likely to be on their emotional and mental health. We see a role for artists and arts organisations who will be able to make a great contribution to overcoming these challenges, using creative means to support schools and charities to support young people.
 - III. Some schools are likely to see arts as less of a priority as they deal with 'catch up' challenges which will further compound the issues we were dealing with before the crisis.

The support needed to deal with these is above all else, financial. Subsidy will be needed more than ever before to enable artists and arts organisation to survive – and in return they will be able to contribute a huge amount to the recovery of society.

- 3.2 We believe that as a sector support organisation, we are well placed to meet other local needs that emerge in the Cultural Education sector and provide some of the support that will be required such as the CPDL needed to adapt to a new world, fundraising support, practice sharing etc.
- 3.3 Our survey demonstrated that the top 5 CPDL needs being identified by freelancers and smaller organisations in the Cultural Education sector were how to create digital content, how to ensure good safeguarding in digital delivery, marketing and social media, business skills and organisational development and supporting mental health and wellbeing for children and young people.

4. What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

- 4.1.1 Funders and government departments are clearly capable of speed and flexibility – can we request they use these superpowers in the future world too.
- 4.2.1 Small and nimble sector support organisations like ours are needed and could be used more. We act at speed to help and respond, continue to invest in us.
- 4.2.2 There are large numbers of arts organisations working with the most vulnerable children and young people. They are there for them as valuable and trusted services providing far more than 'activity', often standing in the space left by reduced youth

and social services. The services they provide could arguably be seen as more vital to society than larger well-funded arts institutions, certainly at times like this. Yet these are the organisations who are relying on short-term contract work and as such are more vulnerable to being lost. Infrastructure or core funding is needed.

- 4.2.3 Many outside the Arts Council portfolio feel invisible – especially freelancers. They need to be seen as the integral part of the eco-system they truly are in our future plans.
- 4.4.1 Small amounts of money are the difference between survival or not for these kind of small charitable orgs. More efficient use of public money in the future could make a substantial difference to them. For example, if every well-funded arts organisation used the learning from this ‘zoom’ phase to cut out more unnecessary travel and hospitality, the public purse is then capable of stretching further to support more of these grassroots organisations and individuals.
- 4.4.2 The business models and ‘plans’ of smaller arts organisations and freelancers rely almost entirely on the acquisition of short term funding. More support to fundraise, to learn how to build reserves and how to build full cost recovery models is one of many needs.

5. How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

- 5.1 It feels too early to predict how the sector might evolve.

But DCMS can support our future by using its influence to highlight to other government departments (such as the DFE), that this moment in time clearly demonstrated that art, culture and creativity are essential and fundamental. And need to be treated as such.

How did schools respond to making home learning possible? With creativity. Making home-learning resources that returned to creative learning approaches not rigid curriculums.

How did we overcome our need for continued social interaction? With art, culture and creative experiences. For example watching theatre collectively as a nation.

How did we ensure that work and family connection remained? With online platforms designed by the creative industries.

How did we express hope? With creativity - rainbows in window.

What do we need to protect - to see as essential, not a luxury to be cut?...

**...creativity, art and cultural opportunities.
The soul of our society during times of crisis.
It begins in schools and in young people’s lives.**