

## Written evidence submitted by Manchester City of Literature

### IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DCMS SECTORS INQUIRY

### HOUSE OF COMMONS DCMS SELECT COMMITTEE

### Submission in response to call for evidence

This is a submission of evidence to the Select Committee from Manchester UNESCO City of Literature and partners. In summary:

- Manchester UNESCO City Of Literature is a broad and diverse partnership of over 30 organisations including universities, writing agencies, independent publishers, cultural venues, public and independent libraries, Manchester Literature Festival and grassroots spoken word promoters.
- The evidence we offer therefore represents both funded and commercial organisations, building-based organisations and micro-enterprises and SMEs.
- It shows literature is an interconnected ecosystem and that the impact it delivers economically and socially is in peril.
- The literary sector, alongside the wider creative and cultural industries, needs a targeted strategy to ensure survival.
- The agility of the literary sector and its role to support well-being, empathy and literacy should be key components of the cultural recovery strategy.

*"What is forming is the exact set of circumstances, we are not capable of outlasting. Without intervention, it is likely to only be those with access to private capital reserves who remain."*

Nathan Connelly, MD of Dead Ink Books

*"There's a kind of freedom you get in reading that can be hard to find elsewhere."*

Okechukwu Nzelu, author of the bestselling debut novel *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*

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

COVID-19 and the national lockdown have led to:

#### 1. Immediate closure of venues and cancellation of live events

Manchester has a vibrant spoken word scene and hosts author events and talks year round through the long-running Manchester Literature Festival, the two universities in the city - Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Manchester - as well as

grassroots promoters and bookshop readings. Live literature events in Manchester engage approximately 50,000 people each year, all now cancelled. Examples include:

Manchester Literature Festival delivers an annual literature festival in October and year-round events. Cancelled Spring events included a sold-out night with Hilary Mantel, with a major loss of ticket income. The entire October festival, and all its associated commissions, schools works and workshops, are threatened with cancellation. This means the loss of an entire year's box office which, when aggregated with the loss of associated memberships and corporate sponsorship, accounts for approximately 50% of annual income. It will be extremely difficult to survive the financial year from grant funding alone, and the Literature Festival expects to have to use up most if not all of its meagre reserves to cover core costs.

The Portico is an independent library with no regular investment from public bodies. Over 60% of its income is drawn from membership subscriptions, hosting live events and talks, exhibitions, catering and ancillary sales. Since closing its doors, all of these income streams have run dry. For example, in the past three months, the Library has had to postpone or cancel 21 events, nearly all of which were sold out. The rest of the annual events calendar is in danger of being cancelled. The lack of physical footfall has led to a complete loss in revenue from book, artwork, print and kitchen sales.

Manchester Poetry Library is the North West's first public poetry library based at Manchester Metropolitan University. The June 2020 opening has been postponed, including the first season of events with an estimated reach of 10,000 visitors within its first six months.

## **2. Participatory work with children and young people has been cancelled or curtailed**

In Manchester, 78% of schools engage with cultural organisations as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. 82.5% of this work is targeted at KS1 and KS2 and so is key to giving pupils the skills to progress within and after formal education. Manchester City of Literature partners dedicate significant resources and time to literacy and reader development and cross-curriculum learning. Very little of this work has transferred to online provision, and where it has it has a significant drop in reach and impact. Examples include:

All schools and participation work for the Manchester Poetry Library outreach programme has been cancelled, including Poetry in the Park and events as part of Manchester's first Festival of Libraries, that aimed to reach over 5000 children, young people and their families.

Manchester Literature Festival runs a year round programme called Little Reads, for 2-6 year olds and their family members. These interactive workshops use drama, dance, songs, play and craft to explore children's picture books and take place in Longsight, Levenshulme, Moss Side, Central, Stretford, Old Trafford, Salford & Stockport libraries. This cancelled programme served families in areas of deprivation and provided crucial social and learning support. It has been replaced by a video series on YouTube (and then this has been temporarily suspended due to staff furlough).

The Portico Library has continued to run the popular Sadie Massey Awards to support literacy development across KS2, KS3 and KS4. More than 600 students submitted work however this is dramatically down on previous years and the accompanying workshops and tutoring sessions to support literacy development were cancelled.

### **3. Commercial income sources to independent publishers have been hit by the closure of book shops and by the partial closure of distributors**

The Reading Agency reported<sup>1</sup> in April that nearly 1 in 3 (31%) of people are reading more during lockdown with a particular spike among young people (18-24) where almost half (45%) are reading more than before lockdown. The volume of books loaned digitally from libraries has also increased<sup>2</sup>: loans of e-books, e-magazines and audiobooks were up an average of 63% in March compared with last year. And 120,000 people joined libraries in the three weeks after lockdown began.

However the survival of many publishers is in jeopardy. The Bookseller survey<sup>3</sup> released in early May, showed that close to 60% of small presses polled said they could be out of business by the autumn, with half of that number indicating they were facing a medium to high risk of shutting down altogether. For those that survive the autumn, 36% stated that they were a medium to high risk of closing in March.

Manchester is home to world-class independent publishers Carcanet and Comma Press whose reach and sales are international as well as many other smaller independent presses. Nationally, Creative Industries Federation has calculated that publishing could lose £7 billion in revenue (-40%) and 26% of jobs (51,000), affected by the closure of bookshops and decline of print sales.

### **4. Professional development has moved online**

Writing agencies such as Commonword and The Writing Squad provide mentoring, classes and courses for published and unpublished writers including those marginalised and at the start of their careers. COVID-19 has meant all support has moved online. There have been some small benefits of this as it has allowed writers who may struggle to attend in-person due to health or socio-economic reasons can now participate (provided they have IT equipment and access to reliable broadband). However the impact on these writers and agencies will be felt in the medium- to long- term (see the response to question 3)

### **5. Digital platforms have provided short-term solutions but are not sustainable**

The literary sector in Manchester has put events and activity online. Young Identity and Comonword have delivered writing classes and courses online. The free online writing

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<sup>1</sup> <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/new-survey-says-reading-connects-a-nation-in-lockdown.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52368191>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/small-presses-fear-being-wiped-out-autumn-1202281>

course 'How to make a Poem' from Manchester Writing School reached 3000 members of the public. The WRITE Where We Are Now project led by poet Carol Ann Duffy at Manchester Metropolitan University has been an important way of engaging residents in activity and has supported well-being and overcome isolation. However this and other online activity cannot be maintained over the medium-term. There is a danger that audience appetite for online content will become saturated especially when there is so much variable content to navigate. With major platform events like BBC Big Book Weekend and Hay Festival providing digital content for free, it is difficult to monetise current activity, further weakening the sector where the majority of organisations rely on earned income.

## **6. Impact on Creative Writing MA students and provision**

Manchester Metropolitan University's Writing School has 18 staff and teaches 180 undergraduates, 218 Masters students and 10 PhD students, the largest community in the UK. Manchester University's Centre for New Writing has 14 staff and 195 undergraduates, 50 MA and 20 PhD students. Creative Writing is also taught at Bolton University and Salford University with 100+ undergrad students.

The universities will be severely impacted by COVID-19: the University of Manchester is modelling an 80% drop in overseas students and 20% drop in domestic students from this autumn. University funding for graduate studies has been cut with immediate effect for the coming year, while at the University of Manchester fixed-term contracts have also been cut with staff being offered an initial voluntary severance scheme which is likely to affect provision. The reduced throughput of writers entering the profession will impact on the publishing industry as the supply of new writing dries up, while the universities' hosting of events, and staff- and student-led work with primary and secondary schools and with non-HE partners are also threatened and certainly diminished.

## **7. An ecosystem severely weakened**

The literary sector across Manchester is an interconnected ecosystem. Writers sharpen their practice at open mic nights or in competitions or through study. They feed the independent and commercial publishing houses and provide teaching and mentorship for a younger generation and in schools and colleges. Literature is often a hidden part of the creative and cultural industries but it achieves considerable outputs with very modest public investment. Some micro-enterprises and individual writers have been able to weather the immediate storm but the whole sector is significantly weakened by the cumulative impact of the crisis to all areas of the literary sector and the city.

This is felt widely across all Britain's creative industries who generate over £111.7bn a year for the UK economy. As Creative Industries Federation reported<sup>4</sup> this month, the cumulative effect on the creative and cultural industries will be catastrophic: research from Oxford Economics projects a combined revenue drop of £74 billion in 2020 (£1.4 billion a week), with a GVA drop of £29 billion. 406,000 (1 in 5) creative jobs are expected to be lost. Impact

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.creativeindustriesfederation.com/news/press-release-cultural-catastrophe-over-400000-creative-jobs-could-be-lost-projected-economic>

will be felt in all parts of the UK, with creative industries projected to be hit twice as hard as the wider economy overall and up to three times as hard regionally. The need for a swift and substantial intervention is of utmost urgency.

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

We welcome the Emergency Funds from Arts Council England and National Lottery Heritage Fund. Both bodies, and particularly the former, responded swiftly and with purpose. The Emergency Fund programmes were clearly articulated for such a swift response and have undoubtedly avoided a catastrophic and immediate closure of large parts of the arts, culture and heritage sector.

However there were limitations:

- ACE funding targeted at National Portfolio Organisations was *emergency* funding: it was targeted at those at most immediate risk over Summer 2020. The crunch for Manchester Literature Festival and other autumn festivals will come later: if the lack of income can be survived in the autumn the issue is then pushed to the end of March 2021. Many cultural organisations and charity Trustees will be faced with proving an organisation is still a going concern and can remain solvent. Without further phases of financial intervention in autumn 2020 and Spring 2021, cultural organisations are likely to fold.
- The Job Retention Scheme has been used by about 1 in 6 of partner organisations. Where it has been used it has been vital to allow these organisations to survive. As one of our members reported *"The [Job Retention] Scheme has provided security and now flexibility and will enable us to reopen with more control. It has enabled us to survive the initial lockdown and to start planning a future public programme for a post-COVID world, something we weren't sure would happen"*. For many literary and cultural organisations, freelance and contract staff are essential to deal with seasonal and project activity and for them this scheme was not applicable sadly. See our comments on the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) belows.
- One writing organisation with a staff of seven (three FTE) chose not to use the Job Retention Scheme on mental health grounds. Several staff members are shielding and without regular contact through work they are at significant risk of becoming profoundly isolated. On compassionate grounds the organisation chose to maintain their positions from its reserves. This has reduced the need and costs of supporting acute mental health and wellbeing issues within the workforce in the short-term but reduces the financial resilience of the charity in the medium- to long-term.
- Retail, Leisure and Hospitality grants from Manchester City Council were also an important part of the emergency response and one member described it as *"a game changer"*.
- Small Business Rates Grants were not applicable to partner organisations who are charities as they receive mandatory charitable rate relief. So the impact of this support was negligible for the literary sector in Manchester.
- The inadequacies of SEISS have been pointed out already to the Committee and we direct you to evidence submitted by Society of Authors, Authors' Licensing &

Collecting Society (ALCS), Creative Industries Federation and Tracy Brabin MP. The median annual income of a professional author is £10,500, which is well below the minimum wage and represents a 42% drop in real terms since 2005 (ALCS survey 2018). This means writers as well as many creative practitioners and freelancers who work in the literary sector in Manchester have portfolio careers including teaching, administration and community engagement work. This is not recognised or appreciated by the definitions of arms-length bodies in the distribution of emergency funding or by SEISS. Wellbeing generally is a significant issue within the arts, and the impact on freelancers and staff on temporary and insecure contracts should not be ignored. There is an economic cost associated with this, and this disproportionately affects workers who have protected characteristics and so inequality will be deepened.

We also wish to acknowledge the support of Manchester City Council and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), who have both acted swiftly to support cultural enterprises by maintaining commitments, being flexible on delivery of grant conditions and advancing grant payments to ease serious cash flow issues. This work and their commitment should not go unnoticed by the Committee.

We welcome the appointment of the Commissioner for Cultural Recovery and Renewal and creation of the Task Group. We look forward to the opportunity to work alongside the task group towards a strategy for reopening and plan for recovery. However, we note the lack of representation from writers, publishers and libraries and think this is a serious omission. The UK publishing industry alone makes a significant contribution to the creative industries as a whole, with a turnover of £5.7bn in 2017. And this success depends on the talent pipeline supported by writing agencies, graduate study and festivals to nurture and showcase work.

Crucially, we appreciate the emphasis on performing arts in membership of the Task Group, but this emphasis must be extended to the ways in which literature too has become so intertwined with performance and events in recent years through the rise of the festival and the bookshop appearance arenas which have also “gone dark” since March 17th.

The literary sector, alongside the wider creative and cultural industries, needs a targeted strategy to ensure survival.

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

- Literature as art-form is under-funded. In 2019-20, only 1.9% of Arts Council England revenue funding via the National Portfolio went to literature organisations. The figure for Project Grants (for 1 April 2019 to 30 November 2019) is better with 7.8% of funding going to literature (however just 1.4% went to literature projects in the North of England). Whilst some micro-enterprises are fleet of foot and can adapt, larger organisations including festivals, independent libraries and cultural assets like Elizabeth Gaskell House will be more exposed by weakened finances and then the

coming recession. The impact of Covid-19 has revealed the fragility of the sector and intervention is needed to support cash flow, strengthen balance sheets and ensure financial resilience.

- British Council's Cities of Literature: Initiatives, Impacts and Legacies report shows that UNESCO City of Literature status can have tangible cultural, image, social and economic impacts including medium and long term boosts to tourism visits and spending. Significant retrenchment will reduce the ability of literary activity to enhance the UK's international profile and the visitor economy. Manchester had 11.8 million tourism visits in 2018 and the city's literary and cultural offer was a key component of this.
- Public libraries are essential community resources, which promote literacy for all ages, strengthen social capital and promote social mixing amongst its users<sup>5</sup>. They have been weakened by local authority cuts in the last decade and need dedicated investment to continue to play this crucial role in the post-COVID-19 landscape.
- As the ecosystem is weakened so is the ability to nurture and showcase new talent. Literature and spoken words are platforms that with better support can address the kind of discrimination and gatekeeping that locks 'minority' groups out of the arts. Independent presses are vital to nurture and platform diverse and under-represented talent. More than 40% of independent publishers are focused on debut writers; while Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic writers and writers from disadvantaged backgrounds are the focus of many presses. The impact of COVID-19 means not only that the small progress in recent years is lost but that there is likely to be a decrease in representation and black voices in literature to the detriment of all.
- Workforce diversity will also be negatively impacted. A Publishers Association survey in 2019<sup>6</sup> of 6,432 individuals working for 42 publishing organisations showed that 11.6% of respondents identified as BAME – lower than the UK population (14%), and significantly lower than London (40.2%) or Manchester (33.4%).
- The survey also identified that the majority of people working in publishing grew up around the south east of England (19.8%), London (15.1%), and the east of England (12.5%). Major publishers realise that this suppresses talent too and several including Hachette and Harper Collins have announced plans to open offices in Manchester and elsewhere in the North of England. This trend and the co-existence of both major and independent publishers in the North needs to be supported as part of the levelling up agenda.

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

- With 95% of creative businesses employing fewer than 10 people and operating on a project-by-project basis, greater consideration and resources need to be given to how freelance creatives and writers are supported in emergency situations and on an on-going basis.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Evidence\\_review\\_economic\\_contribution\\_libraries\\_2014.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Evidence_review_economic_contribution_libraries_2014.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.publishers.org.uk/diversity-of-uk-publishing-workforce-detailed-in-extensive-survey/>

- We want to see specific interventions to ensure that Black and Asian voices are not marginalised or removed from our creative workforce or from what the industry publishes. This is particularly crucial as Black and Asian communities already experience socio-economic disadvantage and this will be exacerbated in the coming deep recession. This will require financial intervention.
- We want to see local government and cultural funders given the significant resources they need to support local cultural ecosystems to enable them to play a full part in civic recovery. As the lockdown is eased gradually and social distancing remains in place, hyper-local and small-scale events should be part of towns and cities' reopening plans alongside larger cultural venues (often city-centre based and remote from neighbourhood communities). Spoken word events can play a crucial role here. Reading and writing, both individually and in groups, can increase connection, empathy and confidence and overcome the negative impacts of isolation.
- DCMS should support and stimulate digital innovation. For instance investing in the development of non-commercial digital platforms that are more cost effective and do not risk the misuse of sensitive audience data by big corporate organisations. And supporting affordable e-commerce platforms and solutions that allow publishers and book sellers to compete with the giants of the online marketplace such as Amazon.
- We would like to see response protocols drawn up so that event organisers, venue promoters, book shops and libraries can lock down early and in an orderly fashion if the country is hit by a future pandemic.
- Bearing in mind the wide reach of many of the reading and writing initiatives from literature organisations – supporting self-expression and health and wellbeing in terms of the healing quality of arts and culture - there is a need to work together to establish the impact of these programmes and how we measure cultural value going forward. There is the potential for an over-simplification of the social value of the arts, and consideration needs to be given to resource and support research and evaluation.

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### **Background on Manchester City Of Literature and partners**

- Manchester was designated a UNESCO City Of Literature in 2017. The successful bid was delivered by a partnership led by Manchester City Council, the University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University and the many literary promoters, publishers, festivals, venues and writers in the city.
- Manchester City of Literature was constituted as a not-for-profit company in May 2019 and became a charity in May 2020. Our mission is to unify the collective strength and voice of all those involved in literary activities across Manchester.
- The partnership under the Manchester City of Literature umbrella is broad and diverse. It numbers over 30 organisations including the University of Manchester,

Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester Poetry Library, Manchester Libraries, Read Manchester, the Portico Library, John Rylands Library, Chetham's Library, the International Anthony Burgess Foundation, Elizabeth Gaskell House, the Working Class Movement Library, Carcanet Press, Comma Press, Flapjack Press, Saraband Books, Pariah Press, Dead Ink Books, The Writing Squad, Commonword, Young Identity, Verbose, Bad Language, Poets & Players, Dostoyevsky Wannabe, Fly On The Wall Press, Manchester University Press, Manchester Muslim Writers, Rochdale Festival of Literature and Ideas, Ripples Of Hope, Manchester Children's Book Festival and Manchester Literature Festival.

<https://www.manchestercityofliteratureconnected.com/>