

Written evidence submitted by Brighton Dome & Brighton Festival, Dance Umbrella, Fierce Festival, Gateshead International Festival of Theatre, London International Festival of Theatre, Manchester International Festival, Norfolk & Norwich Festival, Shubbak - A Window on Contemporary Arab Culture, Transform Festival, Wiltshire Creative

19 June 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

Committee Inquiry: Impact of COVID-19 on the sector

We make this submission to DCMS as a group of the UK's leading multi-disciplinary performing arts festivals. From London to Norfolk, Birmingham to Glasgow, Belfast to Nottingham, Manchester to Hull and beyond.

Most of us have had to cancel our festivals scheduled for 2020 or move them entirely on-line and those of us planning events for 2021 are scenario planning for when and how our festivals can return and gather artists and audiences together safely. Artists and freelance cultural workers bear the brunt of the impact. There is little or no work for them currently and the means of creating new work for 2021 is severely curtailed. Many of the artists who work in our festivals also depend on national and international touring for their livelihoods and these opportunities have disappeared.

Our festivals connect the very best of British and international theatre, music, dance and visual artists to local audiences across the UK, animating our cities and enriching our communities. Many of us collaborate, exchange work and co-produce with international cultural organisations, enhancing the UK's cultural reputation across the world. We look forward to working with DCMS and the Home Office so that once unrestricted and non-quarantined international travel is able to resume, we can continue to do this.

Festivals are an important part of the UK's cultural life and integral to a larger cultural ecosystem. We work in partnership with cultural venues such as theatres, galleries and museums, but also with other charities/not-for-profits, grassroots organisations, local councils and other civic bodies. We have deep roots within communities and contribute at a local level to well-being, combating cultural exclusion and addressing inequalities.

Our festivals are celebrated city-and region wide and have considerable economic impact. For example Manchester International Festival's 2019 edition reached an audience of 302,000 and delivered an economic impact of £50m. We play an important role in driving cultural tourism and are valued contributors to local enterprise: for example in 2019, 55% of audiences at Birmingham's Fierce Festival came from outside the city.

With the Covid-19 shutdown the impact on festivals is significant and our interdependence with the rest of the sector - with venues who may face closure, with artists who may be forced to leave their profession and with audiences who will take time to regain their muscle memory and return with confidence to live events - creates very real vulnerability.

Festivals will play an important role in the recovery of our towns and cities, revitalising their centres and providing key moments for gathering, reflection and community building. Many of us are working in tandem with local authorities to help achieve this.

As a sector, we are sharing information, best practices and innovating together. However we need clarity from the government on the strategy and timeline planned for recovery. We support the recommendations already made by SOLT, UK Theatre and other sectoral bodies for DCMS including:

1. Review and removal of social distancing restrictions and quarantine conditions for international travellers at the earliest opportunity and keeping the Furloughing and SEISS schemes until both social distancing and restrictions of international travel have been completely lifted
2. Working with HMRC to invest in the arts now by making crucial adjustments to Tax Relief programmes. We support the sector's call to increase the Theatre Tax Relief rate to 50% for 3 years and to include expenditure related to community work, education and digital presentation
3. The call from Black, Brown and minority ethnic artistic leaders to ensure ethnic diversity is protected and inclusion of Black, Brown and minority ethnic professionals is a key part of creating the recovery plans for our industry, as is representation from a breadth of experience from institutions, venues, festivals, companies of all sizes and scale.
4. The protection of Local Authority Leisure budgets which are crucial to sustaining the sector's workforce and community impact.
5. The development of a Cultural Investment Participation Scheme to enable Government to protect and incentivise work that has meaningful societal impact, including skills development schemes, ticket accessibility, education and community work
6. Increased support to arms-length funding bodies such as Arts Council England, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Arts Council of Wales and Creative Scotland to enable project grant funds to be quickly reinstated.

We look forward to working with you and the DCMS team to reopen a strong cultural sector that will help the country's recovery and improve the lives of its people.

Signed,

Kris Nelson & Stella Kanu, LIFT

Daniel Brine, Artistic Director and Chief Executive, Norfolk & Norwich Festival

Kate Craddock, Festival Director, GIFT: Gateshead International Festival of Theatre

Aaron Wright, Artistic Director, & Pippa Frith, Executive Producer Fierce Festival, Birmingham

John McGrath and Mark Ball, Artistic and Creative Directors, Manchester International Festival

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LJ Findlay-Walsh, Artistic Director, Take Me Somewhere Festival, Glasgow

Matthew Austin and Kate Yedigaroff, Co-Directors, MAYK, Bristol

Paul Russ, Chief Executive & Artistic Director, Dance4 (Nottedance Festival)

Mikey Martins and Anthony Baker, Artistic and Executive Directors and Joint CEOs, Freedom Festival
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Ruth McCarthy, Artistic Director, Outburst Queer Arts Festival

Richard Wakely, Artistic Director and CEO, Belfast International Arts Festival