

Written evidence submitted by the Kent and Medway Cultural Transformation Board

Response to call for evidence into the impact of Covid 19 on DCMS Sectors.

The Kent and Medway Cultural Transformation Board is an unincorporated group of cultural leaders who are responsible for strategic planning to develop a strong cultural offer across Kent and Medway to make extraordinary cultural activity available that enriches and transforms the lives of everyone. Through the high level aims of create, innovate and sustain, the remit of the Board addresses the production of work and the development of skills and aims to encourage the growth of the sector through sustainable business models.

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

We carried out extensive consultation with over 100 sector professionals through a series of virtual round table meetings led by sector professionals and covering theatres, museums, galleries and heritage, small scale theatre companies and touring, festivals, workspaces, education and screen industries.

The creative, cultural and visitor economy sector in Kent and Medway is an integral part of our plans for transformation and vital in driving social and economic regeneration of Kent through jobs, tourism, education, health & well-being.

We experienced the sudden and complete shutdown of all spaces for public performance, the restriction in movement and gathering of people preventing any rehearsal, creation and development of work, studios and workspaces closed and international touring ceased. Kent's creative economy relies heavily on tourism and the night time economy and has a strong festivals sector and all are now temporarily redundant.

Those dependent upon income generation have been hardest hit whereas others with public investment have funds to fall back on to either compensate for loss of income particularly in the case of local authority theatres and festivals but also to enable some to pivot their businesses and respond to the crisis by providing activities to support people through lockdown. There is an issue with organisations pivoting to survive where it moves them away from their core activity and mission. A number of venues and companies will not survive.

The creative and cultural industries are over 60% of Kent and Medway's workforce and up to 93% are freelance. Four fifths lost all of their income overnight and many did not meet the criteria for emergency government support. Opening venues and cultural hubs in Kent and Medway is essential for us to retain this talent which has helped build our creative reputation and secure significant public investment.

Some of the sector shifted quickly digital content in the form of on line workshops, exhibitions and performance and companies like Jasmin Vardimon providing dance and other health related activities which have reached international audiences. Much of this was free to access with knowledge of how to monetise digital content being limited but with organisations keen to maintain a public profile.

The social benefits of shared experience is lost and the issue of digital poverty has been brought to the fore where limited or no access to on line content puts vulnerable people further at risk. Some organisations provided safe distribution of physical art and craft

resources, delivered through district hubs, Children's Services and Adult Social Care to combat this.

A limited number of workspaces were able to continue to operate where social distancing was possible and some practitioners were able to continue working in home studios, some using the opportunity of having no public facing classes or workshops to build up levels of stock or diversify their practice. Mental wellbeing quickly became an issue due to isolation.

The role of workspace managers as mentors and the role of workspaces in social interaction and collaborative practice was brought sharply into focus when these functions were no longer able to take place.

The large body of volunteers connected to cultural organisations are stood down. With many of them being elderly. Evidence is showing they might not feel safe enough to return to public facing roles for some time.

Some free to enter heritage sites which remained open along with visitor hot spots experienced public order issues with car parking, littering and visitors making temporary toilets. Staff in heritage sites gave up trying to advise people to comply with social distancing because people were making their own rules.

Withdrawal of ACE Project Grants and no immediate plans to reinstate them has left some organisations without a clear way forwards. Some artists and creative companies exist from one grant to the next and the crisis has highlighted the fragility of this approach. Local authority spend through cultural programmes has been lost to the economy.

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

Property ownership or property occupation is not central to creative industries business models. As a result, the Governments approach to emergency support via the rates system has not reached significant sections of the sector.

The retail, hospitality and leisure support was accessible for only a very small number of businesses, where they had premises that also had shops and cafes.

Small rates support was taken up by some studio spaces, but on the whole for a range of reasons, including charitable status, creative industry companies did not meet the criteria. The sector is overwhelmingly freelance or micro, it works from home, in shared spaces and does not occupy spaces in the way that generates a rates bill.

Furlough has been useful for some workers, but a huge majority of the sector workers are freelance. Furlough will need to continue to support our venues in particular. Venues face significant dark periods while shows are devised, rehearsed and go into production before revenue can start to flow again.

Support mechanisms have been problematical for freelancers with many finding they are not eligible.

Arts Council England should be commended for the speed and clarity with which they actioned support for the sector. Colleagues from the South East office have been very visible throughout the crisis maintaining regular contact across the sector and providing support by taking active part in discussions and sharing good practice. ACE funding was essential but

not having access to project funding is undermining organisations ability to forward plan. The current packages provided an effective response to the emergency but more consideration needs to be given to a strategic approach to recovery.

Revenue support is urgently needed which does not rely on delivering FTEs because that is not the operating model for the sector.

The pandemic is having profound effects on people, with anxiety and isolation already widespread. Public cooperation and cohesion are vital for tackling the consequences and healing in the recovery period. Reconnecting and recovering will be difficult for many and participatory arts can focus its activity by connecting with marginalised communities, challenging inequalities and helping people to navigate a changing world. It is vitally important that the outcomes of community engagement are not perceived as secondary and separate to the economic impact of the creative industries.

The Kent and Medway Cultural Transformation Board have held a series of roundtable discussions led by Kent County Council with a mix of sub sectors of the cultural and creative. The roundtables were chaired by industry leaders and were incredibly useful, started quickly at the start of lockdown, to share experiences and give critical support. They have moved into recovery and longer term planning and provide an excellent model for sector development in the future.

Medway Cultural Partnership increased the frequency of its meetings to connect with the sector, also providing valuable support to help the sector understand the impacts of C-19 and offer mutual support where requested. NPO's have stepped up to offer advice and support.

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

In places like Margate and Folkestone, that are emergent creative clusters with shallow roots, combined with reliance on the visitor economy the impact is devastating. The positive reputation generated by these two places on the rest of the Kent and Medway creative economy can not be underestimated. They deliver creative talent and innovation via networks and collaboration and significantly strengthen supply chains, particularly into London. Places where there is a combination of new growth and a reliance on the visitor economy will need focussed rapid revenue support before the end of this summer season.

There will be significant impact on the sector and there will be a need for financial support to prevent a large scale collapse particularly if social distancing measures remain in place for a long time. It is inevitable that the sector is likely to get smaller.

Support for redesign of buildings and systems is required. Signage, screens and hand sanitiser stations will need to become a feature with more stringent cleaning. One way systems are difficult to put in place in many cultural venues particularly historic buildings where the combination of limited lift access with a one way flow may render the building non DDA compliant with return to a lift to descend floors being against the flow for example. Queuing for box offices, WCs, interval bars and procedures for evacuation will need to be designed and catered for. Social distancing will not work in theatres.

Public confidence will need to be rebuilt. Strong messages from government will be needed to help bring audiences back. There will also be significant support needed to help the disability arts sector, particularly for those companies who have been required to shield for a significant length of time.

Staff training particularly for those dealing directly with the public will be required so that staff feel safe in their work environment and confident in instructing the public on how to use spaces in a new way. DCMS must coordinate standards of good practice to enable consistent messaging.

Opportunities to interact with exhibits and displays via touch screens and shared headphones is redundant. English Heritage are working on downloadable technology using smartphones and support for accelerating research, development and implementation of this technology is essential.

The pandemic has accelerated the use of digital technology in ways which will undoubtedly remain. Good practice guidance and a 'smart digital' innovation fund to develop and test uses of digital technology to embed it in the sector in ways which are sustainable and of value to consumers are essential. The temptation for creative organisations to shift their work to digital has been strong but not always appropriate for the work itself or for the future of the organisation.

Unemployment is a significant threat and will undoubtedly result from reduced footfall and revised business models. Talent drain particularly from the freelance workforce migrating to other sectors is an issue. As the sector shifts in response to the changing market and new consumer behaviour, there are opportunities that new sorts of creative and cultural careers will emerge. Support with spotlighting creative careers, back to work and training or retraining packages is essential.

Careers in the creative sector have often been seen as unpaid and unstable professions and the length of time the sector takes to come through this could add fuel to this argument and which combined with a lack of creative education could leave a significant skills gap. DCMS have a strong role to play in advocating for the strength of the sector in supporting people through lockdown by creating a sense of unity and providing activity and content which has brought out people's creativity. Resources to develop a strong evidence base is essential alongside cross government work to embed cultural education into the curriculum.

The screen industry has developed a robust approach to Covid safe practice which has been endorsed by government but is still failing to restart production because productions can't get insurance.

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

Overall, sector support was mobilised very quickly and was welcomed by those able to access it in the early stages. Lack of clarity was experienced by some, especially the freelance workforce. Local authorities had different interpretations of guidelines which meant some organisations were deemed ineligible for support. Some decisions were later overturned when more clarity was given but that left many feeling anxious and distressed at the potential of losing their business for an unacceptable period of time.

The sector itself was brought together through roundtable meetings organised by Kent County Council as part of a coordinated approach to an economic recovery plan and through the Kent and Medway Cultural Transformation Board and Medway Cultural Partnership both of which increased the frequency of Board meetings. These opportunities for discussion are strongly valued by the sector and have led to a collaborative approach through information sharing and joint projects.

The sector was also quick to respond to lockdown and produced content which was available both digitally and physically through artpacks distributed with food parcels and emergency medical supplies. The sector unilaterally saw its role as combatting social isolation and loneliness and providing opportunities for creative learning and content for cultural entertainment. This has been widely acknowledged in the media and would benefit from coordinated and evidence based messaging led by DCMS.

Clarity is required around the value of the creative sector and strong lobbying for the role it can play in rebuilding the economy and society. We have heard a lot about how important it is to get sport back up and running, particularly football, but nothing to the same level about the value of our cultural organisations and how important they are. Work is needed now to plan for real about reopening. Organisations have been working with each other to interpret government messaging and how it might apply to them as well as looking at different approaches internationally.

How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such

The cultural sector is uniquely placed to be part of the long term solution for community recovery and resilience. The connection between participating in creative activities, prosocial behaviour and wellbeing is increasingly well documented, and evidence shows that communities who have engaged together in participatory arts projects are more connected and resilient.

A radical approach is needed to business support mechanisms for the sector that focusses on developing a small cohort of organisations and businesses that deliver wider outcomes: brand, reputation, place making, support for other entrepreneurs and spin outs.

The development of cultural infrastructure and revenue to support must become an obligation of housing developers to embed creativity into new communities and put theatres at the heart of placemaking plans as community cultural hubs around which neighbours gravitate, as an essential component of community integration.

Support delivery of the Thames Estuary Production Corridor as it develops into the UK's most significant creative cluster: the reciprocal relationship with London as the global leader and South Essex and North Kent Coast's capacity for growth, combined as a single economic area will deliver a powerful economic driver. It has the land resources, talent and access to global markets to drive UK economic growth. It will increase employment in the Thames Estuary area by 50,000 jobs and add £3.7bn GVA.

Get messaging to visitors right to manage expectation in hotspots particularly where small towns are not coping with basic provision of parking, managing litter and access to WCs for large influxes of visitors. Going forwards, putting heritage attractions and cultural activity at the centre of tourism messaging will make it more sustainable.

An active campaign to be clear that the sector is open for business with support for reassuring the public that events are safe and advance information give comfort to people on how to navigate new rules of engagement.

Support the sector to innovative with ways to create and present work and to re-purpose their buildings for as long as Covid19 remains a significant threat. The sector will need support with practical issues like building and festival site adaptation and redesign, queuing systems, hygiene measures, environmental controls and PPE, the need for staff training and Covid 19 risk assessment and 'Covid Managers' to carry out assurance possibly leading to

an 'event safe' kite mark. Communication plans will be required to remarket services, reassure audiences and re-educate them in how to use the 'new' spaces.

Lockdown has shown the value of the sector getting more embedded in communities at a hyper local level and has led to new collaborative partnerships with organisations bringing different skills to the delivery of innovative projects. Going forward, funding should enable organisations to work much more closely together to bring activity and opportunity more widely into the community. We need to rethink and redesign their models of practice, including how we engage with the public, through digital and hybrid projects.

Traditional theatre and festival business models will not work with social distancing. Investment is needed for venues and events to enable them to develop new product for a mixed programme and create an active production pipeline for new work which will work in a Covid safe environment.

ACE Project Grants should reopen to enable organisations to plan and additional funding needs to be found to enable recovery and support for start up and training for creative sector entrepreneurs in leadership and business development. The supply chain for artistic work has effectively come to a stop and with withdrawn funding and the closure of studios and rehearsals. A source of modest and easily accessible funds targeting new production would be an effective way to kickstart supply chains.

DCMS need to invest in research, development and implementation to deliver a strategy for smart digital which demonstrates good practice and also how to monetise digital content. The Strategy should also look at how it can support all people to access to technology and broadband. Digital technology was quickly accepted as a new way of working and has been valuable in unexpected ways where small local content has been amplified to connect with wider audiences nationally and internationally. The crisis has made the prevalence of digital poverty apparent.

DCMS must take a lead on creating flexibility in planning and property legislation to enable change of use of empty buildings and create easy in, easy out occupancy agreements to enable a vibrant mixed economy to populate town centres and high streets.

DCMS must work more effectively across government departments to support creative education and engagement for children and young people. Creativity has played a pivotal role in helping people get through the lockdown and for young people in particular helping to identify pathways and opportunities within the sector. The creative sector is a leader in innovation but it is important that this is valued and is accessible to all.

There is a real sense of the need to review production processes and viability of reduced capacity with social distancing. There is a desire to review a range of artistic products and look at different approaches to using creative assets. There are also considerations around funding and collaboration with the potential development of consortium approaches.

There is an urgent need to provide training programmes to address talent drain caused by freelance workers reverting to other sectors and disseminate a positive profile and clear learning pathways for creative careers.

It is essential that DCMS champion a move away from the value of creative workspace being measured by GVA and Full Time Employment. Recovery needs to include a better understanding from funding and decision-makers and stakeholders of the value of workspaces, particularly in placemaking and employment. Current output requirements often

have the effect of stifling the sector. New models that do not rely on monetising products are needed for creative R&D which generate benefits back into community and the economy