

Written evidence submitted by Mess Up The Mess Theatre Company Ltd

Evidence: Covid 19 Impact

Who We Are

Mess Up The Mess are a youth theatre based in Ammanford, an ex-mining town in South Wales. We use theatre and creative arts to work with disadvantaged and marginalised young people locally and across South Wales raising aspirations and skill levels and providing opportunities for young people to find their voice. Our work has a strong wellbeing focus and many of the young people we work with face challenges including low confidence / self esteem, autism, ADHD and mental health difficulties.

Mess Up The Mess's activities are free at the point of use. Many of the young people who access the service would not be able to afford to pay. Mess Up The Mess receives no core funding and is funded through a mix of short term project grants and commissioned work. Turnover for the past few years has been approximately £250,000.

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

The immediate effect was to put a stop to all face to face work with young people. We moved all work online. This continuing contact during lockdown has been vital for some young people, who would otherwise have had no contact with anyone outside of their families. Other young people are finding working online more difficult than face to face activities.

Financially, opportunities for earned income disappeared overnight. For organisations, such as ours, these are a vital part of the funding mix.

As we start to consider moving out of lockdown and moving back to face to face work we envisage there will be challenges in maintaining safety and re-engaging with young people. There are going to be additional costs incurred in PPE and other equipment (such as hand sanitiser stations), increased cleaning requirements. There is likely to be competition for such equipment and services, which may mean delays in bringing services back. There may also be increased staff costs as capacities of activity sessions are reduced to comply with social distancing, and more sessions are run to compensate. There are also complications for organisations such as ours who run activities out of shared community spaces. We will need to be assured that these spaces, and their other users, are being operated to a Covid Secure standard and are compatible with our own risk assessments.

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

Our experience has been with arms length bodies and has been generally positive. We have secured additional funding and funders have been flexible with existing funding streams. Current interventions, however, are limited to the immediate six months. We recognise this

is due to central government policy, however the situation for the sector will become more challenging as the funding streams come to a close.

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

The outlook is challenging. The existing financial support is likely to disappear at a time when organisations will be beginning to deliver services face to face again, but in an environment where social distancing and other safety measures will be limitations on what is achievable and are likely to increase delivery costs. They will also (hopefully) be planning how to chart a course to more normal times. It is likely that earned income streams will only recover slowly during this period. This could be the most dangerous time for many smaller organisations.

Smaller organisations, like Mess Up The Mess, that are rooted in their communities, are built up slowly. It takes some time to create the reputation and track record that gives funders and partners the confidence to invest greater levels of time and money in working with them. They develop knowledge and expertise in working with their communities that cannot be replicated easily. When such an organisation is forced to close, it's not replaced easily or quickly. It is essential, then, that in emerging from lockdown, financial support and funding streams are available that are accessible, flexible and suitable for smaller organisations.

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

The real strength of the response, in our experience, has been its rapidity and the ease with which emergency funds have been able to be accessed. Turnaround times with Arts Council Wales' Stabilisation Funds have been short and there has been a clear focus in the fund's objectives. There is a lesson here for further support measures if they are to be as successful.

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

Communication between all stakeholders will be key to responding to future challenges. Government at all levels, arms length bodies and other funders will need to engage with the sector and its umbrella bodies to ensure that responses are timely, clearly targeted and focused on what is needed.

From our perspective as a youth arts organisation, we foresee the young people we work with will face substantial challenges in the short to medium term. Their future opportunities are likely to be constrained and they are likely to face difficulties in accessing employment and education. There will be even greater need for the kinds of activities we deliver. We will be tailoring our services to support young people through the difficult times ahead.