

## Written evidence submitted by Storyhouse

Written evidence to the DMCS inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

*This short submission addresses opening plans for UK art centres incorporating smaller theatres, the futures of which we believe are being placed in doubt by an absence of guidance and a lack of confidence.*

### Our Organisation

Storyhouse is a charity, a combined arts and theatre producer that operates out of its venue in Chester. The £37m centre was opened in May 2017, officially commemorated a year later by a visit from HM The Queen and The Duchess of Sussex. It is one of the most visited cultural centres in the UK with over 1m customer visits per year.

Inside the building we operate a two-form theatre, a cinema, a community hub, a restaurant and the city's public library, the latter with the longest opening hours in UK. The unique model has been of much interest to the government's library taskforce as a model for future similar developments.

Over 2,000 participation sessions per year are aimed at marginalised local communities. We run our own MA education course alongside a large slew of education and other programmes for young people. We sold 254k tickets last year and are a busy theatre producer. Storyhouse is currently UK Theatre's "Most Welcoming UK Theatre" and in 2018 was the overall winner in the Guardian's Public Service Awards.

Storyhouse operates on a concentrated freelance model with very low standing production overheads. It sells 94% of tickets online and has no box office, reception desks, stage door indeed many of the trappings of traditional theatre infrastructure are re-imagined. We sustain 215 fte jobs and provide an estimated £23.5m economic value to our extended city community. We are one of 507 UK charities running theatres.

Storyhouse has continued with two thirds of its participation sessions since lockdown, 350 of these delivered online since March 16<sup>th</sup>.

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

Operators of theatres with large proportions of earned income (ours is 76% of £6.49m) and those with smaller reserves also low levels of ACE funding (3%) are particularly hard hit because they face large standing overheads and no prospect of any income.

- Some are in an already difficult position because their finances were hit by a slow trading environment over Christmas 2019 which saw many regional theatres reporting box office for the Christmas season, happening at the time of the election and Brexit conclusion, at only 70% of expected earnings.
- The Arts Council is providing emergency support to September for many of these caught in the maelstrom, however there is a backlog of otherwise resilient organisations who may not be able to survive past the theatre equivalent of the high street's January rent reckoning, if they cannot stage a show at Christmas.
- This is not to suggest a return to normal business. However, the theatre industry is walking through two lobbies: one for those with primarily audiences to serve, and another for those whose role is also to serve a local community. The latter need to open now; their resilience comes from the support they enjoy from their communities who can help sustain them. If their re-opening is delayed, there will be more casualties than necessary.

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

- The Job Retention Scheme has saved most theatres, including our own, from collapse in the short term.
- The response from ACE is very welcome and timely - but is aimed at organisations likely to be trading insolvently by September. It will not catch many regional and subsidised regional theatres and arts venues in trouble not then, but by Christmas.
- The government has not yet shown enough emphasis, which we would urge, in providing separate roadmaps for theatre buildings and for theatre producers – the two are being conflated and are not the same.

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

- We can see no pressing reason why many theatres and arts buildings should not open in line with movie theatres: the safety of the customer experience would seem only to be

separated by management of toilets and by the presence of a person on a stage. We can stagger toilet visits by changing theatre etiquette, and one person speaking on a stage (from a safe distance) presents no enhanced safety risk that we can see.

- We would urge guidance on this for the country's army of community-based theatres, comedy and music venues, arts centres and mixed-use venues.
- We support the statements from larger theatres and producers that they cannot open with social distancing; we see this is the economic reality, however the industry is not singular in nature, so guidance is needed that reflects this diversity.
- We have postponed our £34m open-air theatre season and an eight-week open-air cinema season. There is an imminent green light for indoor cinemas but no mention of the obviously safer environment of the outdoors, this should be provided
- At Storyhouse we have acquired the necessary DCP projections package this week to convert our main theatre (800 or 480 seats) into a cinema, which we will do until Christmas at least. There are many other ways that theatres can and should be encouraged to open. There is talent and inventiveness in the sector which will be starved, if deprived of the opportunity.
- Many community and regional theatres are doubting their ability to stage a Christmas show. Current distancing rules are likely to expire yet they are the only benchmark against which they now calculate risk. We would urge however that the government assist with this specific issue by indicating a clearer roadmap, namely a timetable for reducing distancing as well clarifying how they expect structures of social groups in theatres to evolve.
- Properly managed and legislated contract structures can help mitigate second waves and many arts venues would rather put on productions with the risk of postponement rather than the alternative.
- A socially distanced show may still be a show worth making for many, because of the importance to communities. Theatre has been made with masks before, in fact that's where much of it began. Guidance should be tabled now but innovation in its application actively encouraged.