

Written evidence submitted by the North Yorkshire Culture Conversation

Submission of evidence for DCMS Review into the impact of Corona virus

Mustard& CIC

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Introduction

The North Yorkshire Culture Conversation is part of the work of Mustard& - CIC on behalf of North Yorkshire County Council and partners to develop a new County cultural strategy.

North Yorkshire is the largest county in England. It is predominantly rural with a coastal boundary and with 40% covered by its two National Parks. Despite centres such as Scarborough, Northallerton and Harrogate, its geography limits connectivity across the area. Cultural infrastructure is similarly varied, distributed and predominantly small scale. Over the past 20 years, there has been investment in cultural venues including theatres, galleries, museums, alongside and festivals and the high profile The Tour de France Grand Depart and Tour de Yorkshire cycle races.

The Culture Conversation has focussed its early communication on collecting the evidence that will not only take forward the development of the Cultural Strategy but be useful in informing the DCMS Inquiry. It has engaged with a wide range of the cultural sector in North Yorkshire, from commercial organisers of large-scale events, through cultural freelancers and volunteers, to leaders of cultural organisations of varying shapes and sizes. This has given a unique insight into the state of the Cultural Sector in North Yorkshire, the likely long-term impact of Covid-19, and the ideas that are emerging to ensure the sector remains innovative and useful the communities of North Yorkshire. The Culture Conversation has only just begun and will now continue to engage with the NY Cultural Sector over the coming months.

This submission collates key findings emerging from conversations to date.

Summary

The key points emerging from our early Culture Conversations have been:

- The effect of Covid-19 has been significant with most cultural activity shut down.
- Organisations and individuals are focusing on survival and are not yet planning beyond the next six months.
- Many have accessed government support, although they see the main challenge as coming later when this support ends.
- Significant numbers have been unable to do so or have lost the ability to access Lottery funding, as this has refocussed on emergency funds.
- While some organisations are hoping for trading to resume in the autumn, the majority anticipate business not fully resuming until at least 2021.
- Mental health and well-being issues created by Covid-19 are proving challenging.
- On-line working has proved challenging due to lack of digital infrastructure.
- Lack of connectivity generally across rural and coastal communities highlighted by lockdown and by new connections on-line.
- Culture is still seen as important within communities and local authorities.
- There is a need for support in developing a new safe environment in which culture can thrive with audiences and practitioners.

- There is opportunity in the embracing of a uniquely North Yorkshire ‘Green Normal’
- The sector is keen to innovate and be useful to its communities.

Q1 What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

“For us cancellation has meant a six figure loss for the year 2020”

“We lost a hundred grand that first week”

The immediate effect of Covid-19 on the Cultural Sector in North Yorkshire has been the shut-down of a significant proportion of its activity, and the focusing of attention on survival through loss of income and the moving goalposts of the crisis, rather than planning for the future. And, while some organisations are hoping for trading to resume in the autumn, the majority see 2021 as the point at which they will have a new start.

Where possible the sector has engaged with on-line working although the key North Yorkshire challenge in this area is poor WiFi connectivity due to the rural nature of the County. In addition, the older demographic of North Yorkshire is often not connected, whether through lack of hardware or lack of inclination to engage with new technology. While some have been successful in offering services on line, often being able to engage with new audiences, such as small museum which has developed games and attracted a new younger audience, many reported being crowded out by the national/international offers from organisations with wider reach and greater budgets – or profile *“There’s so much online now we’re competing with Joe Wicks”*.

Engagement with audiences is mixed. One music-therapy community interest company have turned themselves into an interactive ‘magazine show’, working harder and longer to support their audiences, while others admit that they ‘haven’t mastered what community engagement looks like online’. Another local literary organisation has resorted to more analogue engagement through postcards and telephones.

There is a strong reliance in North Yorkshire on the Village Hall network and, since this network has seen its own challenges due to Covid-19, it is much missed. Cultural sector connectivity does not appear to have been prevalent prior to lock-down and this has been highlighted by the creation of several online communities, many of who have not met before. The Museum Development Network ‘Zoom Elevenses’ was highlighted as being particularly useful. Several people expressed a desire that they continue ‘Zoom meetings in real life’ after lock-down ends, and the idea of co-working spaces has emerged.

While on-line networks have been well-received, the consensus was that they could never make up for face to face contact, which is the essence of our business. It was also noted that mental health issues within our community and workforce were particularly challenging – with staff and volunteers “affected by lack of usual social contact and anxiety about the future of the organisation”. It was observed that the use of Local Authority Emergency Distribution Networks had been useful means of continuing engagement.

An overarching positive message is that Culture appears to be still important to the local authorities, with Scarborough looking at culture as part of their ‘Big Ideas by the Sea’, Craven ‘Lakes and Dales’ Great Places project and Selby and NYCC moving forward with cultural strategies.

Q2 How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government Departments & arms-length bodies addressed the sector’s needs?

Furloughing and other government schemes have been accessed but there is still a significant number of people for who this has not proved possible, with one participant sharing “I’ve never felt so unsupported, it’s really scary”. A universal basic income was noted as one means of addressing this.

Business has been maintained where possible through discussions with funders such as ACE and NLHF and the continuation of project grants. However, there is a general concern that the main challenge will come later when these supports are removed with participants identifying the need for further economic and non-financial support: “further support will be needed for those cultural organisations that survive the current

crisis” with new cross-sector partnerships and training and skills development programmes identified as popular priorities.

Q3 What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

While most organisations and individuals believed that it is too soon to call the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19, (many participants expressed the feeling that without any certainty or baseline data it was simply “impossible to plan”) some key areas were identified from our discussions.

The challenges of digital connectivity are particularly prevalent in North Yorkshire, both in terms of infrastructure and skills. The roll-out of reliable broadband to the County would transform the cultural landscape, enabling services to be delivered on-line and practitioners to connect.

A universal concern of participants in our Conversation was that audiences and volunteers would not feel safe in cultural venues and events. Questions such as ‘how do you offer a main stage with social distance?’ or ‘how do you convince a 60+ volunteers that it’s safe to come back?’ were raised. The development of an assurance scheme or kite mark that would reassure staff and audiences was supported. There was also a plea for the building of a supportive partnership with health and safety advisors that could develop a joint approach to the new normal.

Concerns over the potential impact of imposed social distancing, such as the reduction of theatre audience capacities to 30%, raised concerns on how businesses could survive on 30% of their previous income. Support on these new imposed business models is required, although it was acknowledged that by the time many of the businesses reopened, there would be more information and lessons learned in the public domain.

There was also acknowledgement of the predicted economic crash with critical income generators, including tourism, significantly impacted. Many of the worst hit organisations are those who previously would be identified as the most sustainable due to their level of earned income. The recovery of these sector-leaders is critical, with participants identifying that redundancies and reductions in hours for many staff will be a reality of their recovery process. A cultural venue in the County explained:

“We face the prospect of making some staff redundant or drastically reducing their hours to be certain that we can afford to continue operating on a reduced budget. Remaining staff will be asked to work more flexibly and may have to be issued with new contracts as a result.”

In North Yorkshire this is seen as having a potential a long-lasting knock-on effect for the sector’s workforce and ability to thrive.

“In the longer term we anticipate that there will be greater competition for jobs in the sector and a move to more freelance working as resources are stretched and short contracts for funded projects become more the norm than at present. New entrants will need (and probably find it hard to find) more job security if we are to retain the best within the sector”

Q4 What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

It was acknowledged that Arts Council England had responded swiftly to Covid-19, although a perceived focus on only their funded organisations was raised as a concern. NLHF were perceived to be slow to response and their restriction of funding to previous applicants was disappointing. It was suggested that opportunities to support the sector had been missed by what are de facto development organisations. There were fears for project-based organisations in the future as their current projects came to an end.

More broadly there is a concern that many in the cultural sector have slipped through the cracks of or left unsupported. Some organisations identified a lack of support at a local level saying “nobody has been

concerned about individuals or small, limited companies like ours... they haven't even sent out a survey, there's been no advice, no guidance"

Q5 How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

"Creatively this requires a radical rethink, but we are not afraid of the challenge"

There is still a passion for culture in North Yorkshire among those in the Culture Conversation. They are keen to innovate and to be useful to their communities and beyond.

Playing to the strengths of North Yorkshire, with the amazing countryside and coast was identified, - - "we're an open and beautiful area so that gives us an advantage" - and the National Trust's 'New Green Normal' was embraced.

The importance of 'creative ambition' in making a difference was also noted.

Alternatively, and with more robust technology, the opportunities offered by more interactive communication with local and younger audiences, along with engagement with the North Yorkshire diaspora across the world, was particularly relevant.

However, digital content has so far proven difficult to monetise with many observing that the market place is crowded or even 'saturated' and one organisation stating "all of the content online has demonstrated our (the sector's) value but it's all been free".

It must be noted that the best examples of innovation aren't necessarily digital, but about focusing on what audiences need in new ways. This saw hyperlocal solutions – such as posting out CDs or sending postcards to keep in touch and connect with those with limited access to technology.