

Written evidence submitted by South Gloucestershire Council

DCMS Submission: Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

Introduction:

South Gloucestershire Council welcome this opportunity to submit the below evidence in response to the DCMS call. We have previously submitted this evidence to the West of England Combined Authority, of which we are a Member, and through which we are a Member of the emerging West of England Cultural Compact. We therefore welcome reading of this evidence in association with the West of England Combined Authority Submission.

Name: James Cooke & Martin Burton

Authority: South Gloucestershire Council

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

General: The impact has been significant across the sector in South Gloucestershire. Despite the sector being comparatively small compared to neighbouring Authorities, South Gloucestershire was seeing an emergence in particular of a growing leisure and tourism sector in the North Fringe, all of which has had to cease activity. The regions many smaller towns and villages are home to small museums and heritage assets that have been managed by volunteer Trust organisations, often with many members in the 'vulnerable' age category and again with small or no reserves and a dependency on visitor numbers, rental income and donations. Some of these organisations have relied on emergency loan support, UK Gov Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant, online fundraising from the public, volunteers/members and/or or depletion of those reserves.

On average we get 6.2 million-day visits and 1 million overnight stays per year in South Gloucestershire, generating around £310 million in tourism related spend. There are an estimated 5,600 employees working in the tourism industry which is around 4% of employment in the area. Covid 19 will have a massive impact on these employees and local visitor spending.

Public Sector (Libraries & Leisure Centres): In the Public (and partners) Sector there is a critical risk to Leisure Centres as many of their income-generating services (conferences, events, cafes) will be the toughest to retain under social-distancing guidelines. Centres are facing significantly reduced programmes and redundancies with an uncertain future for the public returning to what may be perceived as higher risk sites. If a worst-case scenario occurs and these Centres go bust, the public

sector is likely to have little alternative but to pick up the cost and the at-risk assets.

The divide between those with digital access and those who have no access has been highlighted. On a very practical level this has left many out of the loop in what support is available in their community / from the Council. From a cultural perspective it has meant they have not been able to access digital online content (ebooks, eaudio tc) which local libraries have been providing

There has been a major trend in downloading of estock across the country. In West of England the LibrariesWest consortium has invested additional funding to meet demand; the services have seen a major increase in new members who will hopefully continue to use the service. The issue going forward will be balancing the need for hard copy stock with estock. ACE did give a grant (£1k) to each LA for the purchasing of estock.

Festivals & Arts: South Gloucestershire hosts the Badminton Horse Trials which attracted 180,000 visitors in 2019 but had to be cancelled in 2020 and will not be an easy event within which social-distancing can be adhered to and managed, given the scale of these attendances. The South Gloucestershire Show and Food & Drink Festivals were also cancelled in 2020. Approx 22,000 visitors visit across the weekend for Food & Drink Festival and more than double that for South Glos Show. Other community events such as Armed Forces Day have also been cancelled.

The impact on the arts is harder to discern at the moment given that we do not maintain a network of freelancers and artists and have not been able to directly engage with this particularly vulnerable group who often may not meet criteria for Government loans and grant support.

Heritage & Museums: 100% of venues have closed and c. 80% of staff have been furloughed. The independent museum sector has been hit hard, where they depend on visitor or rental income, and have very little reserves to fall back on. Many of the volunteers are over 70 with some self isolating. One impact has also been that one of our more accessible heritage sites has been subjected to vandalism during the lockdown period (e.g. Brandy Bottom Colliery).

The VE 75th Anniversary events (Cllrs. provided £30,000 of funding) were held 'At Home' and 'On Line' and physical events postponed.

Heritage Open Days are planned for September with local marketing.

Tourism: In Wild Place Project, The Wave and Aerospace Bristol, South Gloucestershire has three new and relatively unique leisure and tourism destinations in the region, all have which have had to cease activity at times when they are still growing their membership and developing their offers. We know that the latter has been able to access the Resilience Recovery Loan fund and Job Retentions scheme and fundraise online and to develop online 'At Home' activities for families which have also secured some online donations.

There is an issue around lack of data and information for these businesses. Employees are not picking up physical letters and due to furloughed staff, emails

being bounced back and not read. Destination Bristol are continuing to promote their websites and support as an online resource.

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

General: From those businesses and organisations that we have been able to reach, we do believe that they have so far all managed to sustain themselves at least in the short term, either through Government emergency funding, donations, reserves, or, more often than not, a combination of all of the above.

So it does appear that the emergency funding is thus far serving an emergency purpose; however the real risk now is how long the cultural sector has to manage what effectively will continue to be a form of emergency mitigation measures, possibly without the same access to funding or furlough.

If the furlough scheme ceases this would seem to inevitably increase the risk of redundancies in both the public sector (Leisure Centres perhaps being the most stark example) and into the private sector.

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

General: Social-distancing presents a critical challenge across a sector which is geared to attracting people to its assets. In the first instance the organisations need access to the best available information and guidance around social-distancing measures, risk assessments, insurance and implementation. For some organisations that are entirely reliant on volunteers, these will might be much harder to robustly produce and deliver. It seems that the retail sector is leading the way in managing social distancing in potentially confined spaces, sometimes with large numbers and those lessons and best practice will need to be disseminated and adapted to provide guidance to cultural organisations. Where guidance supports the use of PPE it would be helpful to identify suppliers and standards.

Organisations will then have to make calculated decisions on the viability of re-opening against the impacts of competition, sustainability and welfare of staff and visitors. For some there is a risk that the perception of risk will decrease numbers and for some there is a fundamental challenge that social-distancing will make new capacity unviable. We would welcome clarity of the Government approach to organisations unable to remain viable in a socially-distant environment, while development of a vaccine continues.

Many will face the challenge of volunteers either not feeling safe to return to the organisation, or being more formally advised not to. Many fit and well volunteers over 70 have lost all their volunteering opportunities and wish to volunteer again to contribute and have social contact, e.g. with the National Trust, but are being 'lumped in' with vulnerable people. We would therefore welcome consideration of Government support to promote volunteering work in the cultural sector. The Council will commit to working with partners to explore options, particularly in the further

education sector recognising that volunteering/work experience is a part of the curriculum for some relevant courses. However, this may depend on how further education itself is operating.

There is also the economic impact on other sectors that rely on the tourism sector in order to run their businesses. For example, Transport organisations, food suppliers, event management organisations, even laundrettes who rely on hotels operating. This will cause long-term impacts for a wider range of businesses, both small and large.

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

General: The response has been fast and efficient and these arms-length bodies are to be commended.

The many museum support organisations have also been pro-active in providing Coronavirus sources of information e.g. South Western Federation of Museums and Art Galleries (SWFed), the Association of Independent Museums (AIM).

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

General: The sector is certainly going to see opportunities for innovation and increased online services. We have seen our Museums and libraries developing their online offers and are seeing a high take-up on these opportunities, recognising of course that children have been confined to their homes with parents actively seeking that new stimulus. The West of England has been promoting new tech in the sector already through 5G trials and South Gloucestershire is presently developing an Industrial Internet of Things digital testbed to connect our Science Park with our University. We are already looking at the expansion of this to the Bristol North Fringe where the new leisure and tourism sites are situated and discussing the opportunities that will arise from this with those businesses.

On a smaller scale but probably of equal importance there is also an opportunity to capitalise on the upturn in walking and cycling arising from the implications of the virus, but also the time that people have spent over a sustained period in their local communities. There is potential for a spike in local tourism and there is an opportunity to support and promote the development of local cycling and walking routes, heritage trails and nature trails and to inject investment into resources that people will be able to explore with ease and with personal assurance of their safety. App development, increased online resource but also physical maps and information could be developed to support and promote this. There are many heritage assets which may have missed out on funding in the past because they do not have the glamour or international status of other projects. They might, however, be real opportunities to develop local cultural interest, engage communities and support place-making objectives for local councils.

Are there any other key issues?

Public and staff anxiety about returning to cultural venues and being in close contact with other people and staff. Plans will be made to bring services out of lockdown but, if there are future waves of the pandemic, this might require services to be cut back once again and it is unclear about the rules for furloughing staff again in this situation.

Therefore, an extended support structure is required which enables and supports phased re-opening so that cultural services can be provided but costs are covered. This will need to be flexible and responsive. It also needs to be confirmed over sufficient time scale to enable forward planning – short term measures are not appropriate. It might be a combination of financial support for part-time working and health adaptations coupled with either grants to cover losses or guarantees against loss. This needs to be available to organisations which employ staff as well as to self employed artists/ producers.

General:

In the short-term we may need to commit more resource to attracting local catchments to our cultural destinations than promoting foreign tourism.