

## **Written evidence submitted by Exeter Culture**

### **Exeter - DCMS Select Committee Report on Covid-19**

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

The immediate impact of Covid-19 is mirrored in many city locations across the UK. All cultural venues have closed; festivals and major events have been cancelled or postponed; individual practitioners have had contracts frozen or terminated; face to face contact/meetings have stopped; applications to ACE (submitted before the Covid outbreak) have been suspended. Ultimately all normal continuance of cultural life in Exeter has stopped.

Parts of the cultural sector have been able to adapt their content to digital formats and this has been notable in the literature sector. The Library Service has online membership at an all-time high and literature based activity connected to Exeter's UNESCO City of Literature designation has been surprisingly robust.

The real impact has been to organisations that have venues, auditoria and spaces for the public to attend. This includes theatres, arts centres and museums. In the majority of these venues between 70-80% of staff have been furloughed. It is these organisations that rely on a diversity of funding (especially through box office tickets that are and will be the hardest hit. Socially distanced audiences in the auditoriums of the city is not a viable economic model (at a 2m distance) so venues are working together to develop a strategy for the phased re-opening of spaces.

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

The swift action from ACE has been welcomed in Exeter. Indeed many non NPOs have benefited from the Emergency Covid-19 Funding Programme. This has been effective in supporting cultural organisations in the short term for non NPOs. ACE's relaxation of NPOs funding deliverables has also reduced the burden on NPOs to deliver against their funding agreements. A small number of Exeter based NPOs have applied to the NPO Emergency Funding from ACE and we are awaiting the results of this programme. In summary ACE's rapid response has been seen as very positive in Exeter and the staff and systems of ACE have worked very well.

What has been less effective is clear national guidance around the closure and opening of cultural venues. Venues, the City Council and supporting organisations have found the lack of clarity difficult and confusing. The response has been to establish working groups to assist with the support for the re-opening of cultural venues across the city. We are still awaiting clear national guidance on this issue.

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

The major worry in Exeter and across the South West is that organisations will be forced into administration due to the impact of Covid-19. Whilst the ACE measures and support are welcomed, the real worry is post September 2020. Organisations have some finance in emergency grants but these will come to an end from September and this is when we think organisations will feel the financial strain. For those organisations (theatres and arts centres) who programme Christmas productions, these make up a significant proportion of their annual income (between 60-75%). Without these Christmas productions taking place this places these box office organisations under significant pressure. Organisations in this sub-sector are already remodelling their staffing structures to cope with forthcoming financial pressures.

One of the key support measures that is required is financial support packages. There have already been examples of how this could work. [Germany's £1BN fund](#) for venues is an example of this. Our performance sector is an internationally regarded cultural asset and the protection of this is crucial. Experienced and informed professionals have also suggested models of practice for how to support the theatre sector. [Sam Mendes' suggestion](#) is of particular note.

A major worry for regional venues is that national Government may prioritise work to protect or save organisations of national/international renown such as national theatres, galleries and museums. Much has been done in recent years to begin to level up the regional imbalances between London and the regions. It would be a great shame if this is undone and those well-known institutions are the ones protected. We have award winning museums (Royal Albert Memorial Museum) and programmes such as UNESCO City of Literature. It would be a great shame that regional jewels such as these are not recognised and protected.

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

As already stated, ACE's swift response in quickly developing accessible and light touch funding packages is to be applauded. The general consensus in the South West is that ACE acted quickly and effectively and we're available to support the needs of the sector.

A lesson to be learnt is that there should be swifter and clearer action on national guidance for the closure/opening of cultural venues. It has been very difficult for venues to make insurance applications when there is not a clear national/governmental line on the closure of cultural venues.

Another lesson to be learnt from DCMS is how to support LA run venues. In Exeter a significant proportion of Exeter City Council's budget is directed towards support of the Museum. This has been nationally recognised as a City Council that supports culture. However, in Covid-19 this places ECC under significant strain. There should be more recognition/reward to councils that support such venues for the good of the public. This is even more pressing for a council such as ECC as they are a district level authority serving the need of a city of +120k residents.

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

There are a number of positive factors that have emerged due to Covid. Venues have become closer in terms of communications. This has helped these organisations join up communications and discuss joint planning. This could be something that continues post Covid and encourages organisations to work more effectively together.

Without a vaccine, the cultural venues that exist by attracting audiences into their venues will be at major risk. Therefore support to theatres, art centres and museums should be a priority.

Many organisations are beginning to grapple with how they can make more content available via digital routes. This could include the creation of theatre productions, museum collections, visual arts exhibitions all for a digital consumer. Currently there is limited resource/expertise/equipment to support this creation of new digital content. Therefore finance could be directed to assist in the creation of this content.

Finally, regional cultural institutions should not be forgotten. London based (and nationally recognised organisations have much easier access to high level philanthropy. The SW (along with the East Midlands) has the lowest rate of philanthropy for culture in the UK. We therefore need national support to support better levels of philanthropy and increased investment (as per the Germany model above).

**Created by**

**Exeter City Council and Exeter Culture**

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