

## **Written evidence submitted by the Youth Arts Network Cymru**

### **DCMS Written Submission Regarding the Impact of Covid 19 on the Youth Arts Sector** **Compiled on Behalf of the Youth Arts Network Cymru (YANC) June 19<sup>th</sup> 2020**

The Youth Arts Network Cymru (YANC) is a voluntary collective set up by the Youth Arts community in Wales to forge links and share best practice across the sector. The network exists so that we can learn from one another, raise the profile of our work and fight for a sector that we passionately believe in. YANC membership is made up of freelancers, students, emerging artists and key organisations working with young people in Wales including *Mess Up the Mess*, *Frân Wen*, *Sparc Valleys Kids* and *FIO*.

This submission has been compiled by the Secretary and Chair of YANC based on input from the steering group, our membership and wider conversations held across the sector. It outlines the impact of Covid 19 on the Youth Arts sector in Wales and what support is required as we move forward following the pandemic.

#### ***What has been the immediate impact on sector?***

1. The immediate impact of Covid 19 on the youth and participatory arts sector has been enormous. Many of our members reported having projects cancelled or truncated when venues were forced to close and social distancing implemented. Some of these were the culmination of many months, even years, of hard work. As well as the emotional toil of this disappointment, the cancellation of projects resulted in a loss of income for individuals and with limited opportunities to work on the horizon, there is uncertainty and concern amongst the youth arts community both for ourselves and for the young people we work with who have had their access to art, culture and self-expression restricted at a time when it is needed more than ever. For freelancers who have no access to trusts, grants or public funding and who rely on fees paid directly by participants, many experienced a reluctance to pay comparable fees for online sessions and much of this sort of work disappeared instantly. The impact of Covid 19 on household incomes also directly affected people's ability to pay to participate online, even if they wanted to.

2. Organisations and those working on projects that were able to continue had to reconfigure how they would adapt both ongoing and upcoming projects so that they could be delivered via virtual platforms given the social distancing measures and subsequent lockdown. Whilst this has been done successfully in many cases, we have found this transition to working virtually to be time consuming and we are still learning how to adapt our practices. Working virtually is also incompatible with some of the art forms our membership work through and is inaccessible for some members of the community we work with. There is not a 'one size fits all' way around these issues.

3. The pandemic had an immediate impact on our work as an organisation, resulting in the postponement of four regional events that were due to take place at the end of March and during April 2020. These regional events allow us to bring practitioners from across Wales together and are a valuable opportunity for support and exchange, particularly in rural areas where we are trying to develop new networks. Given the value we place on the expertise in our sector, we felt it only fair to honour the contracts we had made with freelancers to deliver and market these events. Whilst we aim to hold them in Spring 2021, they may take a different form, in light of the pandemic, depending on what support the sector needs. Our capacity to deliver them in the future will also be reliant on raising further funds as we have suspended membership fees for individuals affected by the pandemic and moved to a 'pay what you can' fee for smaller organisations.

***How effectively has the support provided by DCMS/Government/Arms-length Bodies addressed the sector's needs?***

4. Many of our individual members have been able to access the Self Employment Income Support Scheme but this has not been available to everyone. There have been gaps in provision particularly for those new to the profession, those who have worked under self-employed and PAYE terms in the preceding years and those who have returned to freelance work after a period in employment. The furlough scheme has meant that some of our members employed by larger organisations have been able to continue to earn a wage but not being allowed to work has been dissatisfying in many instances. With the end of the furlough scheme in sight, a number of these practitioners will also find themselves made redundant and seeking employment or returning to work under precarious circumstances, with reduced resources and budgets, which will hamper their effectiveness. Whilst government support has been welcome, the deficits for organisations are so vast and the future so uncertain, that it is still insufficient.

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

5. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the arts sector as a whole will certainly have a long term effect on youth and participatory arts as well. The closure of venues and spaces is a huge blow to all those that care passionately about the arts and want to be able to access it at all levels for inspiration, aspiration and to develop partnerships.

6. Continued social distancing means we may be looking at working virtually, in smaller groups and alternative spaces for a prolonged period and this has a direct effect on the types of projects we can deliver. For a variety of reasons, including digital poverty and access, not all our participants have been able to be involved in virtual projects. Should social distancing continue, we will need to consider how we can work more inclusively, possibly delivering through different formats, face to face in smaller groups and online but this will be time consuming and require more resources, which we may not be able to provide without additional support or funding. A fund for developing IT resources and training in direct relation to blended delivery formats would be helpful.

7. For our individual members there are deep concerns about future opportunities across the sector becoming very limited. There will be major financial repercussions for our venues in particular. Where freelancers have had ongoing relationships with venues, these partnerships may not continue and in the absence of other opportunities, many practitioners will see their productivity and income shrink. We need to see continued funding for the arts, both at commercial and grassroots levels in order for our sector to thrive.

8. Alongside specialist providers, many of our most vibrant artists, including actors, writers, directors, dancers, choreographers, film makers and visual artists, supplement their incomes and broaden their experience by working with youth companies. In this way, our sector actively underpins and contributes to the wider arts ecology allowing those artists to sustain themselves in unpredictable professions and feeding back into the industry by encouraging them to explore other aspects of their practice whilst working in a parallel sector. A reduction in the opportunities within our sector will have a knock-on effect on those artists and their ability to sustain their careers long term.

9. For those working from home with small children there are further challenges and their ability to work will be diminished if schools do not offer a full timetable. In this instance, additional support for those unable to work due to childcare should be considered across all sectors, as well as for vulnerable practitioners who have to continue to shield to protect their health or that of their families.

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

10. On a more positive note, this unprecedented situation has brought the arts community together and there has been a greater openness and desire to talk and share. Many of our members are seeing the benefits of a network during this period of isolation and we hope that this desire for connectivity will continue going forward. We have also embraced new forms of facilitation and delivery which we can incorporate into our previous working methods, extending our reach and flexibility as a sector. Our sector has shown its persistence and resilience in this time, this is something to celebrate and take forward. We have also seen, yet again, how fundamental participatory arts are for mental health and wellbeing and we need government to take greater notice of this and do more to fund, protect and extend this legacy.

11. The participatory arts and youth arts sectors were some of the first areas of the cultural industries to respond on the ground to the needs of young people when the pandemic exploded. We have the advantage of long term and embedded relationships in our communities, there is a high level of trust and we are able to access those who are most in need. When considering how to move forward post Covid 19 the DCMS need to recognise how crucial these interventions were, often described as a 'life line' by young people. If these are the areas that are cut back post Covid 19, as one young person describes it, what is the point?

*"I'm not allowed on a phone without supervision, but at least on here now I can talk to my friends. I can talk to you. It's making me feel a lot better in myself. It's something to look forward to after the pandemic, we can all go back together, have a nice cuppa, have a nice chat, couple of games, have fun. Like if we haven't got any funding what's the point. What's the point of going back online if we don't have a club to come back to?"*

- Participant in the Care System describes their views on the need for this work post Covid 19.

#### **What further support is needed?**

12. An extension to the self-employment scheme for those that are unable to work would be helpful. Access to work opportunities is also going to be a considerable hurdle, particularly if funding is tied up in larger organisations with different priorities. At a local level, there are concerns for the long term future of smaller venues and organisations that run participatory arts activities, many of whom were already struggling with cuts to funding from local councils and the erosion of their status as essential community buildings. Evidence gathering regarding the socio-economic, health and wellbeing benefits of the arts is well documented and has been further explored during this period so we need to use this to influence local authorities, Welsh Government and Westminster. We must ensure that when the cost of the pandemic starts to bite and local and National Governments are asked to save money, jobs and resources connected to participatory arts and culture are not further eroded.

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

13. Moving forward, it is vital that smaller organisations are included in the conversation about how the arts is funded and in particular how provision is made for youth and participatory arts. Organisations such as ourselves, with democratically elected representatives, are well placed to explain the challenges facing the participatory arts sector and we would welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of our members. We need be able to advocate for the sector that has proved to be so very valuable, in some cases a lifeline for young people, over the past few months.

14. When larger organisations and venues do reopen, their focus will be on rebuilding, commercial output and becoming more resilient. Given the financial strain they have been under, the budget for outreach, education and community work is going to be impacted. Therefore, there is a strong argument for tasking smaller, more agile organisations to continue to deliver participatory and community arts, whilst large organisations recover from their considerable losses. Many funding bodies impose restrictions on individuals applying for grants to work with young or vulnerable people. We would like to see funding ring-fenced specifically for youth and community arts practice, which organisations **and** freelancers can apply to, or where organisations who are awarded additional funds are encouraged to spread that wealth across the

sector and make use of freelancers. We are already seeing this from some companies who realise that if freelance practitioners cannot make a living, our sector will lose a wealth of talent and experience.

15. We have a number of excellent networks in place, these have grown and strengthened during the health crisis and it is essential they are part of the conversation about how participatory and community arts is funded. Whilst larger organisations have closed their doors, it is smaller organisations and individuals who have ensured people, particularly those who are most vulnerable, retained access to artistic expression and had a platform for getting their voices heard. We have kept people connected and we cannot be expected to be grateful for the crumbs that are left over once larger organisations, with a totally different set of priorities, have been fed. There may be a reluctance to return to large public places, even when social distancing is eased and we need artistic and cultural experiences to fill that gap. We need to help people recover and feel nourished, during and after what is a bruising time for us all. It is those at grassroots level, who specialise in serving the needs of young people and communities, that are best placed to achieve this.