

Written evidence submitted by Cardboard Citizens

Submission RE the Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors – 19 June 2020

Background:

When Cardboard Citizens began working in London's 'Cardboard City' – a 200-strong rough sleepers' encampment in Waterloo – few recognised that theatre or the arts could have a transformative impact on the lives of vulnerable people. Now – 29 years later – CC is recognised internationally for harnessing the power of theatre and the arts to give those affected by homelessness a voice and bring about change in their lives.

Cardboard Citizens delivers a varied programme throughout the year, ensuring our work appeals to those who are most vulnerable, both within London, and nationally. This is delivered by a core team of 16 fulltime and 3 part-time staff, qualified associates and freelancers and supported by 15 dedicated volunteers. Our year-round programme includes:

- Education and Mentoring for those affected by homelessness, through a programme of workshops areas such as English, Money Management, Enterprise Skills and CV-writing
- ACT NOW youth programme for 16-25-year olds affected or displaced by providing access to arts-based qualifications, advice and training to support young people away from homelessness
- Dedicated support service providing guidance from our highly trained staff– critical for those with significant support needs such as medical, family and mental health
- National programme of outreach targeting prisons, hostels and day services – to share our model of best practice nationally and ensure we reach those most in need of support
- Regular programme of touring and performances, usually performed by people with experience of homelessness, challenging negative misconceptions, using the stage as a vehicle to share

Cardboard Citizens is a registered charity and a National Portfolio Organisation with Arts Council England.

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

Impact on Cardboard Citizens

Financial impact: We have reduced our target income for 2020/21 by 27% from £1.5 million to £1.1 million, as we are unable to generate money through events, fees, theatre box office sales, or hire of our workspace with social distancing restrictions in place. £0.8 million has been committed from existing funders and individual supporters, and we will need to raise a further £0.3 million income in 2020/21 to deliver an adapted programme of work. We believe that our income streams will continue to be depleted in future.

Delivery impact: With social distancing restrictions, we have stopped all physical delivery of workshops, and (income generating) training events and all planned public events and productions have been cancelled for the year ahead; these include tours to theatres, hostels and day centres, and prisons.

Due to the financial impact of COVID 19, we are operating with 15 out of 21 posts, and with recruitment frozen. We are rebuilding our programme for remote delivery, with a £340k reduction to our operating budget. Across our creative delivery, we have 2 vacant posts and 1 furloughed post, which limits our capacity to deliver creative workshops, training and public facing work online. We have prioritised creative engagement for individuals who are Members of the community which the Company serves over public facing work at this time. 2 of the vacant posts are in the Fundraising Team, with this work now being covered by other senior staff.

How we have adapted our work overall: Our beneficiaries are largely from marginalised groups, they are individuals who have experienced homelessness and other groups at risk of homelessness. As a result of the government restrictions around COVID 19, individuals experiencing homelessness are even more vulnerable to isolation and social exclusion, due to the closure of day centres, hostels and other homeless support services, and very limited face to face support services. This means that the community experiencing homelessness that we work with are an especially vulnerable group at this time.

We know that people experiencing homelessness have been impacted in different ways. During COVID 19, we have received calls for support from our beneficiaries around basic needs such as food and washing facilities, increased calls related to anxiety and mental health concerns, partly due to isolation and vulnerable housing situations (including those with No Recourse to Public Funds who have been unsure of how they can access housing and support without penalty at a later date). Others now have limited online access or are struggling to meet phone costs - so isolation is deepened.

We know from consultation with our beneficiaries and homelessness partners that overwhelmingly, individuals experiencing homelessness have a desire to remain connected to others and develop their creative self-expression at this time.

Since lockdown, we have responded to the needs of our beneficiaries by adapting our approach and safeguarding procedures, as well as developing a remote creative offer (mainly through a series of online workshops, up to four a week), and providing pastoral support by phone and email. We are now delivering these services to people affected by homelessness, and we will be developing and extending this programme in the period ahead. We are aiming to tackle the inequalities that the most vulnerable face during COVID-19 by supporting resilience of individuals through creative engagement, connection and inspiration; our close contact and connection with homeless or ex-homeless people in this period, as well as providing much needed and welcome respite from lockdown isolation, offers us the opportunity to collect stories of people's experiences at this time, with the intention that these can be later incorporated into artistic projects for a wider public, deepening society's understanding of homelessness and the impact of COVID-19.

Our funders have been very supportive of our work and how we have adapted our approach, with some able to top up our existing funding. We have also applied for support from a number of emergency response funds.

We are aware of a number of peer organisations and theatres with a participation/community focus who have also been able to adapt their delivery and continue to provide creative engagement and community support for vulnerable groups, and we are working to ensure we can combine efforts through support and partnership working.

2. 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 been invaluable in supporting theatre companies and theatres to retain their workforce. We also welcomed the extension of the scheme until October with the flexibility of part-time working. Cardboard Citizens furloughed four members of staff, one of whom has now moved on to a new role, two have returned full time, with the fourth person returning in July and working part-time until the end of the scheme.

At the same time, the support offer for self-employed – who make up a huge part of the art sector from actors, directors, designers, production managers, stage managers, and technical roles – has been less accessible and therefore less of a safety net. Many of the self-employed people Cardboard Citizens works with are not eligible for grants under the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme due not a) earning under £12,000 b) being at the start of their careers and so too newly registered or c) earning as both PAYE and self-employed during the last three years. Similarly, assessing grants over the last three years of earnings has penalised many early and mid-career workers whose earnings have been growing as their career progresses. We have identified this weakness early on and made a point of honouring all of our existing formal and informal commitments to our freelancers, and we continue to seek ways to provide opportunities for them where this is financially possible.

The Arts Council's swift support for NPOS, non-NPOs and freelancers has been a lifeline for many organisations and individual workers. However, the focus of the NPO Support Fund on purely economic survival until September has proved problematic, with many organisations able to use their reserves to survive until then, but fears about what will happen in the medium to long term and the larger economic crisis the arts sector is facing. The current wholesale application of Project Funds to emergency support, though doubtless the immediate priority, presents potential challenges for companies like ours in the future – NPOs which have a comparatively low level of revenue funding and depend on occasional but significant applications for project funds in addition. Cardboard Citizens future theatre-making plans include applications to these funds, without which it will be very difficult, for instance to deliver a major project planned for Coventry 2021.

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

Continued financial support for the sector is needed in order to prevent its collapse.

A major concern for Cardboard Citizens is the impact on the crucial work of the sector to become more diverse and representative of society in terms of the stories on stage, the people who create, make,

support and perform in productions, and the audiences who engage with them. The financial impact of Covid-19 on the sector will result fewer young people seeing theatre and the arts as a viable career path, with the make-up of the workforce and lack of role models, in particular, from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, disabled people, LGBTQIA people, people from low-socio economic backgrounds, being a key factor in whether young people from difference demographics see working in the arts as something that is 'for them'. We need to ensure we keep diversity and inclusion at the heart of recovery.

With more creative work moving online, another area of concern is digital exclusion. People who are excluded digitally are also more likely to be socio and economically disadvantaged, including people who are homeless, disabled, and the elderly. At Cardboard Citizens we provide data for people to engage in our activities and have been able to link with other organisations to provide handsets, but this does not address the bigger issue: the digital divide exacerbates inequality, and this must be addressed.

Participatory and community theatre companies such as Cardboard Citizens and many others across the country will continue to play a key role in engaging with 'hard to reach' groups, bringing new people into the arts, and providing support and pathways for those who wish to create a career in our sector. The value of the participatory and community sector must be recognised and supported in its vital work in this area.

Another important area is public confidence in returning to theatres. We need a clear message from Government that returning to theatres is safe. Social distancing in theatres is not a viable option as theatres require high occupancy levels for their business models to work – it will not be possible for theatres to re-open with social distancing measures in place. For Cardboard Citizens, theatre touring has been a part of the strategic model for some years, discharging our wider role to share stories from the marginalised communities with which we work with a general public audience. The lack of any clear dates for reopening of theatres makes any planning in this area impossible. Again, a tour planned for 2021 is currently jeopardised.

In a wider sense, the probable long-term damage to the regional theatre network will be very damaging for smaller companies like ours, which depend on collaborations with larger organisations around the country. Our planned sequence of regional residencies depends on the collaboration of regional theatres – if these no longer exist, or exist only on a very reduced scale, it is highly likely that work such as ours will be given a low priority for theatres with now very limited budgets. The word ecology is appropriate for the sector. All damage affects all, regardless of the particular niche in which they operate.

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

Better representation across the sector in terms of who is invited to part of the Cultural Renewal Taskforce and other opportunities to speak directly to Government. It is vital that you ensure that you are speaking with representatives across breadth of arts workers and arts organisations – with voices from participation and community arts, from organisations working with constituencies made up of socio-economically deprived groups, and representation from organisations led by Black, Asian or other

Minority Ethnic leaders, disabled and LGBTQIA leaders, and those whose constituencies and audiences are largely from these groups.

The messaging around the closure of theatres was unclear and virtually no warning was given of the various steps towards lockdown. A clearer timeline for the re-opening of theatres must be provided so that the sector can plan effectively.

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

DCMS must advocate for the critical role the arts and culture will play in the recovery from Covid-19 in terms of jobs, community building and working to reduce inequality.

Covid-19 presents enormous challenges for the sector, but it also provides an opportunity for us to rebuild differently, and ensure greater focus on and support from Government towards the following areas:

Diversity – we need Government supported pathways into the arts for people who are Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic, disabled, or from low socio-economic backgrounds. The workforce of the arts must become more representative of society. Government must also advocate for the importance of the arts in education and ensure they are embedded into the Curriculum.

Communities and audiences – building trust and confidence with communities, and in turn developing more diverse audiences for the arts is of utmost importance. Government must recognise the importance of participation and community arts, engaging organisations to specifically play a key role in our recovery and rebuilding better.

The Climate Emergency – it is vital that we rebuild sustainable practices into our theatre-making and touring, as developing effective sustainability policies for our theatres and offices, working towards net zero emissions. Government must show more leadership in this area and commit to a “just and green cultural recovery” as outlined in the letter to the Secretary of State from Julie’s Bicycle.

Digital – DCMS must support Government to prioritise narrowing the digital divide, ensuring that fewer people are excluded digitally. As well supporting and investing in training for theatres and theatre companies to work creatively online. Given the discoveries and opportunities forced on companies during this period, and the uncertainty about the future of live theatre, this area critically needs support to enable theatre companies to create new performance and income streams.