

Written evidence submitted by Dr Steve Presence

Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors: evidence submitted to DCMS, June 19 2020

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This evidence is drawn from the ongoing AHRC-funded research project on the UK feature-length documentary film sector (<https://ukfd.org.uk/>). Clearly, COVID-19 is extremely damaging across the creative and cultural industries. However, many of our sector-specific suggestions below may be relevant for other sectors in creative industries – particularly those at the independent end of the spectrum.

Though the project has not yet investigated the impact of COVID-19 on the feature docs sector, we have recently completed the first major survey of the sector (published in the report, here: <https://ukfd.org.uk/policy-report/>) which shows that the feature docs sector is often poorly understood and rarely recognised as a distinct part of the UK's screen sector. As such, the research has shown that the feature docs sector has been significantly under-supported by both film and television policymakers alike, which makes it particularly vulnerable – along with the rest of the UK's independent film sector – to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Many of the problems facing the feature docs sector that we have identified in our report will persist in a post-COVID-19 world – indeed, many will have been exacerbated by the virus. Since the call the evidence asked how DCMS sectors might evolve after COVID-19 and how the DCMS could support those sectors to deal with future challenges, I wanted to note some of the key ways through which we believe the feature docs sector could be supported – these are outlined below. We are currently consulting with stakeholders in the feature docs industry on the recommendations in our report and aim to publish policy proposals in Autumn 2020.

I also wanted to note another UWE Bristol project I am working on – Go West 2: Bristol's Film and Television Industries. As part of this project, I am undertaking, with my colleague, Professor Andrew Spicer, a series of interviews with leading production companies in the region. The interviews include detailed discussions of the impact of COVID-19 and we look forward to writing up the findings of those and submitting them to you next call for evidence in July.

Recommendations to support the UK feature docs sector (N.B These are in abridged form and adapted from our the [Keeping It Real report](#)):

- We recommend that a sector steering group or coordinating body should be established for the feature docs sector. UK Doc Group – which includes most organisation active in the sector and which was convened by Doc Society as a result of our research – does now exist and has met three times, and feeds into the Screen Sector Taskforce. This Group will be key to the sector's development, but it will require a small amount of funding to oversee or carry out the various activities that are required to develop the sector.
- The feature docs sector has a significant problem with diversity on almost every count. Addressing this should be a priority for the UK Doc Group, which should a)

convene a working group in this area; b) collate initiatives across the sector; and c) evaluate them for their effectiveness, strengths and weaknesses.

- There is a need to increase the cultural profile of feature docs within the industry – there is a distinct lack of understanding with regards to how the sector operates as a unique and separate ecosystem within the wider screen sector. Clearly this is a long-term project best coordinated by the UK Doc Group. However, wider screen sector agencies and institutions should take responsibility for this also and as far as possible ensure that dedicated knowledge and understanding of the sector exists in-house.
- There is a need to increased knowledge-sharing, networking opportunities and support for documentary filmmakers outside London. BFI NETWORK is an excellent initiative but the nonfiction element of it is concentrated exclusively in London.
- There is a need for greater transparency in decision-making in the sector.
- Mental health is an issue across the screen sector and can be especially acute for nonfiction filmmakers who often work with vulnerable people in traumatic or even dangerous situations.
- There is a need for more regular and granular data on the feature docs sector, which is often merged with statistics on the fiction sector.
- Lottery funding for non-fiction should be increased. Currently, documentary receives less than 10% of support available to fiction. We suggest this be increased to 20-25%.
- It is essential that the UK's Public Service Broadcasters (PSBs) provide increased support to the feature-length documentary sector. We recognise that these are extremely challenging times for PSBs but long-form nonfiction is arguably more important than ever and is a key PSB genre alongside news, arts and children's content.
- It is essential that any funding designed to replace Creative Europe funds includes a proportion ring-fenced for documentary.
- The lack of development funding in the sector is a major problem, and a key contributor to its lack of diversity, the precarity in the sector, and its problems with mental health.
- UK producers have little to offer the international market as co-production partners. Wherever possible, production funds should be made eligible for international co-productions.
- The tax relief for documentary is a low-cost way to support the sector because of the tiny sums involved in documentary filmmaking when compared with fiction. Our report suggests several amendments to the Film Tax Relief that would help nonfiction filmmakers – some at no cost. These would also be potentially useful amendments for the other creative sector reliefs.