

Written evidence submitted by Head4Arts

Covid Impact Submission

Head4Arts is a not-for-profit community arts organisation operating across Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly and Torfaen, an area that has some of the most economically deprived communities in the UK. Head4Arts is governed at arm's length by a partnership of three local authorities and three leisure trusts and is a member of the Arts Council's National Arts Portfolio of Wales.

Our Mission: To deliver inspiring participatory arts programmes that change the way people see themselves and the world around them

Our Vision: That the South East Wales Valleys is a region of confident, creative, healthy and skilled communities, where everyone has equal access to artistic excellence through participatory arts experiences.

Our Aims: To eradicate cultural poverty by providing arts opportunities that:

- Promote good physical health and mental wellbeing
- Unlock potential
- Help build resilient and sustainable communities
- Work across all art forms, with people of all ages, to provide high quality, inspirational arts experiences that introduce participants to new art forms and unlock their creative potential.

We work with partner organisations from a range of sectors, using the arts to achieve a variety of social outcomes and stimulate positive change in local communities.

Our work takes place in community centres, housing estates, schools, hospitals, local parks, heritage sites, youth centres, theatres, libraries, residential homes – any location where we have the opportunity to connect with people and encourage participation in the creative arts.

Head4Arts has 2 full time members of staff (one currently on maternity leave) with other staff roles fulfilled through service level agreements with other cultural organisations. Its projects, workshops, events, drop-in activities, training sessions, and regional performances are all delivered through freelance arts professionals, making Head4Arts one of the main employers (and source of income) for a wide range of creative practitioners based in the region.

Our Work

Our programme encompasses 7 themed areas with objectives that relate to the targets of the Wellbeing of Future Generations legislation and that reflects the Well-being Plans of the area's Public Service Boards. This way we ensure that our work remains relevant and usefully contributes towards identified regional priorities to address poverty.

Head4 Equality: Extending reach so that all have equal access to participate in the arts

Head4 Happiness: Delivering high quality, professionally led participatory arts activities that bring communities together to combat adverse childhood experiences, loneliness and isolation.

Head4 Health: Programming imaginative arts projects that improve the well-being of communities and support continued good health

Head4 Learning: Delivering innovative participatory arts programmes that promote engagement with learning, stimulate interest in the Welsh language, and explore cultural heritage

Head4 Opportunities: Supporting the continuing professional development of artists at all stages of their careers, encouraging diversity and effectively promoting best practice in participatory community arts settings.

Head4 Green Spaces: Using green spaces creatively to deliver arts experiences that build safe, friendly communities that appreciate the natural environment and enjoy being outdoors.

Head4 The Future: Harnessing the power of the arts to raise awareness of environmental issues to promote positive action for change, encourage more sustainable lifestyles and imagine a better future.

What has been the immediate impact of Covid 19 on community arts organisations like ours?

As our work involves direct contact with people, often the most vulnerable members of our communities, our programme was immediately shut down or cancelled to comply with lockdown requirements.

This had an immediate impact on participants, as much of our work focuses on supporting community well-being. For some individuals, we know that we are providing a lifeline that connects them to other services. Cancelling sessions for an indeterminate period caused our participants distress and anxiety.

It also disrupted our delivery of services to partner organisations. This was especially problematic where the work was linked to grant funding that had a deadline for delivery that was no longer possible, potentially requiring us to return the funding.

It entailed the cancellation of key annual events, like the regional Earth Hour events at the end of March. Our work balances small-scale targeted activities with larger scale events like this, where there is mass participation. This will mean that we will not reach our target participation figures for 2019/20 and have missed an important opportunity for raising our profile nationally.

Our Arts Award moderation was postponed – meaning that 7 young people on alternative education programmes have not been able to gain their Bronze accreditation. For some, this is the only qualification they are likely to gain and their disappointment was understandable.

Covid 19 has had a serious impact on the income of the many community arts freelance practitioners' who would normally be delivering our programme of work. Although we did our best to honour all contracts that were in place, many of them were expecting to be involved in new projects, or to have contracts renewed, at the beginning of April. There is a possibility

that some of these practitioners will not be able to continue in their freelance practice after the Covid crisis, leaving us with a gap in expertise.

Head4Arts has a complex partnership governance, involving 6 local authorities and trusts. We developed business continuity plans, but it was not easy to consult and communicate with our Steering Group members. Two were put on furlough, including our operational lead. After a couple of weeks, we suffered the loss (from Covid) of our lead officer for Merthyr County Borough Council. His widow is also a Steering Group member (for Merthyr Leisure Trust). This meant that we were uncertain of our line management in one of the counties where we operate and affected the morale of our team with the loss of a valuable colleague.

The gap left by the closure of the big national companies, cinemas and other leisure facilities has much increased demand for our work, but the community arts sector generally operates on a shoestring budget.

Following the cancellation of our usual programme, the Head4Arts team has been busy trying to adapt our practice to the new context. This has included:

- Reconfiguring how the team could work from home and overcoming the technical and administrative hurdles.
- Supporting the transition of regular music and choir sessions to an online platform and supporting the arts practitioners leading the sessions to develop the skills needed for this new way of working
- Developing new protocols and guidelines for online participatory activities
- Changing the way that we deliver our work so that more activities could be transferred to online platforms.
- Exploring the potential impact of Covid 19 and lockdown on the mental health and well-being of our communities and creating new programmes of work fit for this new context (what we needed to be doing immediately and what we should be thinking about in the future).
- Inventing new ways to support the well-being of the most disadvantaged members of our communities (those who were most isolated / shielded, those with pre-existing issues affecting their mental health or particularly problematic circumstances, those without access to online support). This included a new programme of “doorstep craft” deliveries to provide activities to address issues of isolation and anxiety. Also loaning the Head4Arts transit van to community groups providing urgent food and medication deliveries in Blaenau Gwent.
- Creating new ways to support freelance artists so they could continue to earn a living (eg. in creating and producing the “doorstep craft” packs) and a “lockdown language learning programme” to improve their ability to deliver their work bilingually. This gave them paid study time and would improve their opportunities for employment post-lockdown.
- Developing a regional programme to support families who have been bereaved during the lockdown and social distancing period, where proper funerals and family gatherings were not possible.

- Making partnerships with emerging community voluntary groups delivering emergency provisions and medication to the most vulnerable so that our Doorstep crafts could safely reach the intended recipients and responding to specific needs they have identified (eg. Year 11 school leavers anxious about being propelled into the unknown without “proper” qualifications, older people confined to their rooms in sheltered accommodation)

Like many small community arts organisations, we are used to adapting to the changing needs of our communities – but there is a huge amount of demand and limited financial resources.

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

We were impressed by how quickly Arts Council of Wales got in contact with us to find out how we were managing and offering advice for financial support. We appreciated their clear steer on ensuring that the National Portfolio members understood the need to honour contracts that freelance artists had been unable to deliver.

We recognise that Head4Arts is in a much luckier position than many organisations. We have no buildings to maintain and very little in the way of overheads. We had also been careful to develop an emergency financial “cushion” in our budgets which we had thought might be needed in the wake of Brexit. Most of our activities are free of charge to participants, so we were not missing any income from sales. There were some savings made through not being able to deliver some programmes of work and the new way of working from home meant that we didn’t bring in any new staff to cover my colleague’s maternity leave. No-one has been furloughed and we are all working at full capacity.

This has meant that we were able to say that we had no urgent need for additional financial support in the short term, and that it would be better to offer this support elsewhere. This is not the case for many other participatory organisations – and certainly not the case for the freelance artists working with us.

We can see that the sort of work we are doing now is likely to continue for a long while, not for just a couple of months. Even when lockdown is relaxed, social distancing will be in place for a long while. Our colleague running theatres and festivals will not be able to operate at all. We worry for the future and our capacity to fulfil demands within our limited budgets.

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

Our reconfigured programme and collaborative way of working means that we are making new partnerships all the time. Discussions are already underway as to how Head4Arts can work alongside other services helping people with the physical and mental legacies of lockdown and bereavement. Plans are already being made so that we can work alongside other organisations such as Community psychology teams, health workers, social housing organisations, care homes, specialist bereavement organisations, chaplains and funeral directors in shaping the services that people will need to access.

We also have other important work to deliver in getting people back to work, supporting missed educational opportunities, preparing people for the lifestyle changes they will need to make to address the problems of climate change and the biodiversity crises,. We want to

engage with international programme that equalities and collaborative practice – but we are afraid that small community arts organisations will not be party to the discussions about sector support and that there is a danger that our need for financial support will be lost in the efforts to help the larger national companies. Organisations like ours are a vital part of the cultural ecology but we fear that our voices will be lost or overlooked.

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

We can see that there will be much work that needs doing in the future and we feel that our organisation has the capacity and experience to play a part in the social and economic recovery after the Covid crisis.

Larger national organisations need to work closely with small organisations like ours, operating at grassroots level. We have the flexibility to be able to adapt to changing needs and can ensure that the benefits of participation in arts extends to all people, not just the privileged or city dwellers.

We look forward to a period of greater collaboration, co-creation, more transparency and a recognition of the value of socially engaged practice. It is interesting that in a time of crisis people have naturally (and very visibly) turned towards arts participation as a lifeline for supporting wellbeing and in bringing people together. Yet we are constantly having to make the case for the arts and proving the value of our contribution. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we no longer had to justify the value and impact of our work, and just had the opportunity and the funding to do our best work.