

Written evidence submitted by Leeds Culture Trust (Leeds 2023)

Response to DCMS Inquiry on the impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors 19.06.2020

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Leeds Culture Trust is an independent charity that was set up in 2019 to deliver Leeds 2023: a landmark year of culture to connect and benefit the people of Leeds and the region, now and in the future. Our Chief Executive and Creative Director is the leading UK theatre director Kully Thiarai, formerly the Chief Executive and Artistic Director of National Theatre Wales. *(Kully's career spans 30 years in theatre, including stints with West Yorkshire Playhouse to launch the city's Transform Festival, becoming artistic director with important Northern companies such as Red Ladder Theatre in Leeds, Contact Theatre in Manchester and being founding Director of Cast in Doncaster, as well as leading Leicester Haymarket Theatre and Theatre Writing Partnership in Nottingham.)*

Background to Leeds 2023

Originally, Leeds City Council had been driving the city's bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2023. After the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, the European Commission ruled that UK cities were ineligible to enter. Despite the setback, Leeds City Council committed £12m to running a year-long festival of culture anyway in 2023 and in 2019 the independent Leeds Culture Trust was established to deliver Leeds 2023. The executive team of 3 are now all in place and we are currently finalising our strategic plan and developing the organisation.

Reason for submitting evidence

Leeds has an extremely rich and mature cultural ecology spanning both the performing and visual arts. It is home to some of the UK's leading regional theatres, dance and music institutions, many of whom are of national significance: Leeds Playhouse, Phoenix Dance Theatre, Northern Ballet and Opera North, to name a few. In the visual arts, the Yorkshire Sculpture Triangle represented by the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Hepworth and Henry Moore Foundation, has helped to raise Yorkshire's profile as a leading centre of contemporary sculpture.

Beyond these institutions, however, the city is also home to important and award-winning independent touring companies and grassroots, community embedded organisations. Companies, artists, producers, curators, and many other makers and creatives who are embedded in the diverse and different communities of Leeds delivering a wide range of artistic activities. Many working directly with individuals and communities that even before Covid-19 hit were already struggling.

Leeds 2023/Leeds Culture Trust is working right across this diverse arts and cultural ecology in Leeds and the wider West Yorkshire region. We therefore have a good overview of the challenges and threats faced by both the big players, and also the smaller community groups in our city.

Our submission is based on our insight gained through conversations and discussions we have had with our partners in the arts and cultural sector since the pandemic began. We think it is important to emphasise the diverse ecology of the arts and culture sector and ensure that the mid to longer-term response to Covid-19 takes this into account.

We also recognise how vital culture and everyday creativity has been during lockdown for people's wellbeing and mental health. Many of our cultural organisations have continued to provide support and activities to their communities. And of course, we have seen many examples of the value of culture in all its myriad forms and how it impacts on our daily lives. So many people turning to the arts for solace and connecting with each other from online choirs to book groups, film clubs and multiple screen-based experiences, through to drawing and sculpture-making, and of course the many ways people have shown their thanks for our key workers.

It is easy in those moments to forget the complex ecology of the creative sector that enables so many to connect and participate in creative and cultural activity, beyond what is sometimes perceived as the narrow frame of 'the arts'. Imagine a day without the influence of culture in your life. The creative sector is involved in all aspects of our lives: shaping and building what you see and watch on screens, what stories you read, what design you connect to, what pictures you look at, what technology you use, what music you listen to and what songs you sing. Culture is everyday and important for all of us and our wellbeing.

Our conversations and connections also highlight the many inequalities that exist, and have become more pronounced during the Covid crisis both within our cultural sector and beyond, with many groups suffering more than others. There is now an opportunity to imagine afresh what the arts are and for whom, and how we can create equity across our sector that can celebrate the richness of our diverse stories and heritage across the nation.

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

Others have already submitted eloquent insights into the immediate effects on this crisis. We wish only to add that our sector is in grave danger and we call on the Government to do all that it can to support the full ecology of the arts. Our buildings infrastructure are vital, but the sector goes beyond that. It is serviced by a myriad of small companies, freelancers and independent practitioners whose livelihoods have already been devastated. Many of whom have fallen through the cracks because they are ineligible for current systems of support.

The sector understands that the performing arts in particular will be the last to come out of lockdown. Again, others have already articulated this in previous submissions, but it is important to note that whilst all of our theatres, music venues, museums and places of mass gathering remain closed culture has not stopped. Many of our organisations, particularly those embedded in their communities are deeply involved in offering support in a myriad of ways here in Leeds.

- **The performing arts**

At the time of writing, no arts organisation that we are aware of in Leeds has

gone into administration through the Covid-19 pandemic, though many are looking at some hard choices depending on the outcome of current discussions with Government. However, we are concerned about the devastating impact on our theatres and the producing and touring companies that provide content for those venues, as a result of the extended period of inactivity. Venues' inability to plan in the current climate of uncertainty has a direct negative impact on the planning cycles of those that supply the venues. Yorkshire has a substantial number of touring companies across dance, theatre and combined arts practice, more so than other northern regions, and this constitutes a massive risk to the local and national ecology.

Further to this, regional theatres and arts producing companies are a vital test bed for creative ideas that feed the commercial sector and the West End as well as other creative industries, such as film and television. They are also the crucible for talent development. In Leeds the strength of the creative education sector is also significant, acting as a training ground and pathway into the creative industries.

The risk of insolvency for a significant number of companies threatens the innovation, the artist development and ultimately the artistic supply chain that makes the UK a global leader in arts and culture.

- **Visual arts, cross art form and festivals**

Leeds and the Yorkshire region are internationally recognised for visual arts and, in particular, sculpture. The Yorkshire Sculpture Triangle emerged from the combined strengths of the world class Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the Hepworth and Leeds Art Gallery along with the Henry Moore Institute. Together they presented the first Yorkshire Sculpture International in 2019 a free 100 day festival of sculpture bringing many thousands of people from the communities of Leeds, Wakefield and the wider region to sculpture for the first time and adding significant value to the tourist offer in the region. The development of a festival of this sort and the many other vibrant festivals across artform practice such Transform, Innerscity Leeds, Compass Live Art and so many more, all require long lead-in times to curate and commission work and engage artists to produce new work. The current lockdown is impacting on research and development opportunities and potentially making artists lives unsustainable in the longer-term which in turn will impact on the viability of local festivals and events.

- **Grassroots companies; health and wellbeing**

Leeds has a real strength in arts companies serving local communities in vital ways including: Slung Low located in the oldest working men's club in Britain and supporting the surrounding community through performance, participation and activity promoting community cohesion; RJC Dance offering numerous participatory programmes for all ages in the heart of Chapeltown and its rich African- Caribbean community heritage and the oldest Trinidadian carnival in

the UK; Chapel FM an arts centre at the heart of East Leeds where there is a very limited cultural offer and giving a voice through music, performance and local radio to the local community; Interplay in Armley engaging disability groups in deeply specialised participatory and performance work across the five senses; children and young people's work from the acclaimed Tutti-Frutti touring work internationally and curating the Little Fett Festival for children, to the online young people's engagement work of Unlimited and their Unlimited Space Agency bridging arts and science to inspire young people in. These companies and so many more often lie in the shadow of the larger more commercial players in the sector but they are the engine room of the rich provision within the city and region and serving the bigger institutions with rich and specialised work. They are so often the leaders of innovation and their loss will have a knock-on effect for the depth and quality of work at the more commercial end of the performing arts.

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

- The furlough scheme has provided a lifeline for many but many staff are freelance and have fallen through the gaps.
- Emergency Arts Council funding has been quick to respond and also provided a lifeline to many organisations.

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

There is an opportunity here to consider a more equitable ecology across the sector and reimagine our relationship with our local communities and audiences, whilst also supporting artists, performers, makers, designers, writers, musicians, creative facilitators, to make the best work they can make that represents and celebrates the diversity of our nation.

There are a number of challenges to consider:

- **Audiences**
How to instill confidence in audiences over the coming years to return to venues. How to support venues to adopt socially distant measures
- **End of the emergency measures** eg the furloughing scheme
Once that comes to an end, many organisations will struggle to pay their staff
It could cripple many smaller arts organisations
Ideas:
Loans for theatres to keep going
Grants to make the institutions safe for visitors
Flexible approach to coming off furlough

- **Skills/talent/education/access to the arts**

The arts and culture sector can play an important role in education and skills development, but will require support to do so.

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

- Recognise that the cultural ecology is diverse and interdependent of each other
- If we don't support the smaller, grassroots artists and creatives it could further entrench inequalities in relation to access and to who gets to make and practice arts.
- Amplify the message about the role and value of the arts and culture sector to people and places in terms of education, health and wellbeing, as well as economic contribution.

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

- Reimagine the use of venues
- Reimagine how performances are delivered
- Role of culture sector in leading the recovery: uniting people after lockdown; contributing to the reanimation of our cities/towns to instil confidence; providing joy and hope for families and improving the health and well-being of citizens in post-lockdown society.