Written evidence submitted by Doorstep Arts

Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors

The Committee invites written evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on any sectors under the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport’s remit (including, but not limited to, culture and the creative industries; civil society; sport; tourism; heritage; publishing, media and journalism; telecoms). In particular, the Committee is interested in finding out:

This evidence reflects the impact experienced in the participatory arts and theatre sector in Torbay and surrounding areas. It includes information about the impact on Doorstep Arts, delivery partners, associate artists and the wider community in which we work.

Introduction and background as requested:

Doorstep Arts is a non-profit arts education organisation and Torbay’s sole Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation. Originally catalysed through Battersea Arts Centre’s Collaborative Touring Network in 2013, we have grown considerably, now providing strategic leadership as part of Torbay’s cultural landscape, working collaboratively to build a strong arts infrastructure.

Participation is at the heart of our work - we run participatory drama groups in community sites and theatres each week through which young people explore drama process, play, and imagination. We run the Foot in the Door mentorship scheme for young people who aspire to professional careers in the arts. We produce the Doorstep Theatre Platform, bringing inspiring touring artists to Torbay and creating platforms for local artists. We support artists to create new work via Stories from Scratch, amplifying voices from Torbay. We work with area schools and libraries through Open Doors, as vital community spaces. Dialogue partnership projects work beyond the arts sector, including with Young Carers and intergenerational projects in residential care homes.

In Torbay, an area with 31.3% child poverty and a further 37% ‘on the edge’ of poverty (pre-Covid), progression routes for young people are largely absent. Torbay has no university and only 4.8% of Torbay’s population attend higher education (HE). 25.8% of Torbay’s adult population have no qualifications. The only HE provision locally closed many of their creative programmes to new intakes in 2019-20, including performing arts & music. This demonstrates the fragility of the web of support for young people in this region of high-need hoping to develop careers in the arts. A gap is widening, whereby future generations will not have the skills to support the sharing of diverse stories and experiences.

As noted in the recent report ‘The Geography of the Covid-19 crisis in England’ (Institute for Fiscal Studies), Torbay is in the top 20% most vulnerable on indexes of health, economic and social vulnerabilities, reflecting an elderly population, economic reliance on tourism and hospitality, and pockets of local socio-economic deprivation, including children’s vulnerability. As a coastal town, vulnerability along health and employment dimensions are amplified and exacerbated by social distancing and its impact on the regional tourism economy.
1) What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

In response to Covid-19 infection identified in two local schools, Doorstep ceased all drama session delivery on the 16th March, with closure of local theatre, schools and community venues one week later. Our live participatory groups moved to regular online sessions - we re-purposed our budget to ensure we could continue to pay our core team of seven part-time freelance artists to adapt their delivery to best suit local children during the crisis. We cancelled/delayed all planned touring theatre work for the April-July period, and began to signpost to digital theatre opportunities for children, including streamed theatre, interactive digital activities and invitations to participate online. By the end of March we had actioned an Emergency Covid fund for nine of our Associate Artists facing immediate and considerable loss to their freelance income.

Immediate impacts for Doorstep:

- Loss of income including: sessional fees across all participatory groups (online groups continue without charge); ticket sales from theatre performances; substantial earned income from enabling actors safeguarding training.
- Pause or cancellation on a number of cross-sector funding bids including support for the Creative People and Places work in Torbay and a wider Cultural Education Partnership bid which was nearly completion.
- Our live participatory groups moved online. Engagement continues but take-up is only around 50% of our usual attendance - we know that we are now not engaging with some of our most vulnerable children & families. We continue to remain in contact with them and have been signposting them to regional food and emergency support services.

Immediate impacts for artists, partners & networks:

- Independent artists found themselves in immediate financial risk: freelance artists delivering live sessions (cancelled), theatre companies (tours cancelled); individual artists relying on summer festival bookings as part of the gig economy. Of these, many were unable to access immediate assistance due to limitations or rules on universal credit or self employment - the SW economy is notoriously challenging for freelancers and many have ‘portfolio careers’ which involve one PAYE job alongside multiple freelance jobs. Whilst Doorstep Arts was able to honour touring contracts and re-align budgets to provide emergency funding for associate artists, not all organisations were able to do so.
- Delays in introducing support for self-employed work significantly impacted independent artists, affecting their ability to cover basic living costs, increasing isolation and poor mental health.
- Small regional theatre companies with a specialism in participatory work were highly disadvantaged by Covid-19 where they did not have core funding to rely upon. Example: regional children’s theatre companies PaddleBoat and Above Bounds rely solely on Project Grants and earned income from schools - both companies have been providing a rich array of online resources, but their return to touring is very uncertain at the moment. These companies can perform to small groups of children at their schools, so their potential to provide safe, specialised support for children has wonderful potential - guidance remains very unclear for this kind of work.
- Unexpectedly, Covid-19 shifted the delivery-heavy nature of many organisations (including our own), creating opportunities for new strategic networks to evolve, including coordinated creative support for South Devon schools (led by Doorstep), establishment of a new cultural & creative network (led by Torbay Culture), as well as capacity to connect with the organisations elsewhere in the UK and internationally, sharing practice and resources.

Immediate impacts for wider community within which we work:
• With many of Torbay’s families working in seasonal and insecure employment, food and basic needs were impacted immediately. Voluntary-sector responses with food parcels, mental health and other support have mitigated pressures to some degree. These impacts are likely to continue for a considerable time, given Torbay’s tourism-focused economy, ageing population, and the number of individuals of working age who have underlying health conditions often linked to socio-economic deprivation.

• Cancellation of structured support for our communities most vulnerable: i.e. care homes and community settings, increasing isolation for older people and for children stuck at home in vulnerable housing or unsafe situations of neglect and/or domestic violence.

• We are seeing a rise in mental health concerns, particularly in anxiety and depression, with the teenagers we work with. Through our digital engagement (Zoom sessions, Protest Project and online invitations to contribute), we can see the impact of: isolation of lockdown, confusion regarding social distancing ‘norms’; and uncertainty about adult expectations of behaviour. Without their usual support structures, these issues are able to fester and grow.

• Doorstep identifies that drama/music/dance/play/arts approaches are highly effective in helping children and young people to make meaning and re-adjust. These approaches need to be seen as essential key-working as children return to some kind of structured education in September. This is a form of Recovery Curriculum which needs to be holistically implemented from the Autumn Term and through this next academic year. Providing Teaching Artist support around positive mental health, wellbeing, and structured ways to build resilience and adapt and evolve out of this experience.

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

As an NPO, Arts Council have provided excellent leadership and support, and demonstrating trust that we as a locally-embedded organisation know what our team, associates and communities need. A pause on usual reporting and flexibility around budgets have allowed us to redirect efforts where they can be most effective. Equally, project-specific funders (in our case NLHF, Youth Music, Esmee Fairbairn Foundation) have provided support, understanding and flexibility over this immediate period.

Inversely, a number of non-NPO partner organisations in participatory arts have felt much less supported. Those who were to submit ACE Project Grants or were working towards the next round of NPO have reported increased vulnerability, unable to plan for the future despite providing ongoing support for their groups. Whilst emergency grants have been welcomed, a number of partners have reported that these have not been sufficient to do more than mitigate immediate closures.

Some of these challenges are specific to smaller organisations (like Doorstep) where all core staff are part-time and freelance, and therefore ineligible for furlough scheme support. These grassroots organisations are best positioned to provide essential front-line support for the communities in which they work. Agile, ongoing community-based work by many of these organisations is ongoing as a result of artists commitment to the local people they work with - with or without pay. Whilst this is admirable, financial assistance for ongoing and essential creative-based interventions has been seriously under-supported by the network of governmental and arms-length bodies.

Doorstep is a young and unusually-structured NPO organisation - a new kind of NPO, made possible via the most recent ‘Band 1’ status in the last round (Strike a Light and Take a Part were also included in the portfolio recently). Our team is all freelance and part-time, with childcare responsibilities considered in all job roles. As such, we were able to continue working throughout the Covid-19 window with no furlough of staff, able to respond flexibly and immediately to our community’s needs. This has largely been possible because of the
security that our NPO core funding provides. The vast majority of small grassroots organisations are not able to continue any kind of delivery due to financial insecurity. This kind of smaller-organisation-grassroots model has great potential, working with communities through the Recovery Phase.

3) 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 real concern that culture & creative practice will be deprioritised further over the long-term, due to a profound public misunderstanding about what arts can and should be ‘for’. Participatory Arts work is essential front-line support right now and in the next phase, our Teaching Artists are Keyworkers in helping vulnerable people re-adjust. Relevant, engaged, participatory arts have a vital role to play in supporting recovery, including for example: supporting schools to find appropriate ways for children and young people to re-engage in learning using play and embodied approaches; supporting positive mental health through trauma-informed creative practice; building community cohesion; building agency, shared memory & societal engagement; reducing isolation. Without clear articulation and demonstration of the role of arts & culture as an inherent part of society, there is a risk that the sector will be deemed non-essential to wider community needs. This is not arts as ‘entertainment’. This is arts as essential to supporting people re-building and re-connecting skills.

With extensive redirection of funding to address immediate need, future funding is likely to be reduced, including for strategic programmes such as ACE National Portfolio. In Torbay and the South West, significant efforts to develop a cohesive arts infrastructure have built on a network of small, grassroots organisations. These organisations do not currently appear to have a voice within the Cultural Recovery & Renewal Taskforce. Without representation of such grassroots, non-venue-based organisations, there is risk that a progressive vision, supported by Arts Council’s ‘Lets Create’ strategy, will not be reflected in future investment and higher-level strategy.

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

- Immediate interventions were effective in supporting organisations and individuals who were already established/well positioned in the wider economic system - individuals in employment or self-employment, and organisations with staff on PAYE for example. In poorer communities, where many work multiple, seasonal jobs, there has been a much larger proportion of people ‘falling through the cracks’ of the Covid-19 response support available.
- Deprived communities such as Torbay have shown strong asset-based approaches to supporting each other (both individuals and businesses), but endurance and stamina to continue dealing with high levels of need as a result of Covid-19 is not realistic. Longer term investment that can sustain innovative partnership networks both within the cultural sector and across culture- and communities-sectors would be beneficial.
- Individual creatives and arts organisations have shown themselves to be versatile and resilient throughout this period. Understanding how these groups can be utilised in other areas of the recovery effort should be carefully assessed: how they may be supported to play these vital community roles, and contribute to areas such as education, health and social wellbeing.
- Guidance about live performance in venues/theatres/alternative-spaces and health/social-distance requirements remains unclear and not sufficiently specific to different contexts. Touring work needs lead-times that allow us to plan months ahead. Small-scale performances in non-traditional venues may well be able to take place safely without bringing large audiences together. Guidance needs to accommodate for more bespoke applications, allowing cultural organisations to help find imaginative, safe solutions.
Public confidence in the guidance/viability of children returning to school has been very varied. For young people and families, the lockdown has brought isolation, mental health and health/education disparities to the fore. Forthcoming guidance on education should prioritisation of mental health, wellbeing and emotional literacy of children will be essential if schools are not to bow solely to focussing on exam pressures and ‘catching up’ academically.

The establishment of the Cultural Recovery & Renewal Taskforce is welcomed, but it needs balanced representation including smaller grassroots organisations and freelance perspectives. The risk otherwise is that larger organisations and venues will be prioritised at the loss of some of the most agile and responsive parts of the creative and cultural sector.

The role of the arts in wider community wellbeing initiatives has been evident through the lockdown, through many independent work promoted online and through the media. Governmental bodies have been slow to advocate for and invest in this essential work, supporting the wider public health agenda and the role that artists, cultural and community organisations.

The closure of vital community spaces has exacerbated isolation, loneliness and a lack of community cohesion. Whilst necessary during lockdown, these needed to be opened for essential services as soon as possible. For example: Torbay’s libraries are an essential public resource, community hub and access point for our most vulnerable communities, including for local people in digital poverty, yet they are not to re-open until 4th July 2020.

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

It is essential that we do not return to ‘business as usual’. The cultural sector sits within, not alongside, our wider communities and the ongoing impact of Covid-19 will be profound, particularly in Torbay. No one size fits all.

Key areas that we ask the committee to consider are:

- **Increased investment in grassroots and socially-engaged creative infrastructure**, ensuring that Covid-19 recovery escalates the ambitions of Arts Council’s *Lets Create* strategy to build a more resilient, democratic and relevant cultural sector. Grassroots organisations have shown themselves to be highly agile over this period - already embedded in communities, they have been able to respond quickly from a position of deep local knowledge and trusted networks.

- **A re-imagining of touring theatre and performance platforms**, increasing support for non-traditional venues. Village halls, public parks & green spaces, community halls, libraries and schools - these spaces, already part of the everyday, provide both trusted entry-points for audiences and a flexibility of the relationship between audience and performers, building in agility from the outset.

- **Increased investment in, demonstration of and advocacy for the role of the arts as a key service**, in terms of interface with formal education, community-building and the provision of public health services and interventions. For example, Doorstep’s ‘Theatre of the Mind’ programme supports young people to build positive mental health and wellbeing, shaping ‘rehearsal skills for life’ when dealing with difficult situations. Such programmes in schools are key to mitigate mental health challenges and vision the future. They are not ‘bonus’ extracurricular programmes, and are as essential as ‘catching up’ academically. We are facing an epidemic of mental health concerns with our young people who have had to sacrifice many of their coping mechanisms.

- **A commitment to environmentally-responsible economic recovery**. Consistent concerns raised in young people’s creative work are climate change, mental health and societal equality - and these are interlinked. Covid-19 has amplified the impacts of environmental, food security, emotional and health challenges for disadvantaged communities. This period of societal disruption has necessitated
substantial behaviour change that can now be built upon to invigorate sustainable and environmentally-responsible cultural landscape.

- **A commitment to learn from the margins:** grassroots organisations based in areas of deprivation can provide expertise and approaches for the wider cultural sector. These organisations already deeply embedded in communities of need, working long term in ‘cultural cold spots’. As our financial models change and society shifts, this is the essential keywork of the new normal. There is an opportunity here to reimagine the creative industries.

We would also direct the committee to this blog by David Jubb, that we believe outlines many of the approaches now needed for the resilience and relevance of the sector: https://davidjubb.blog/2020/05/22/time-to-change-the-story/

Thank you for considering this evidence.