

Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee

Ymchwiliad i'r achosion o COVID-19 ac effaith y feirws ar ddiwylliant, y diwydiannau creadigol, treftadaeth, cyfathrebu a chwaraeon / Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport

CWLC COV20

Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Corau Meibion Cymru / Response from Welsh Association of Male Voice Choirs

Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport

Submission from the Welsh Association of Male Choirs

Introduction

I am writing on behalf of the Welsh Association of Male Choirs. The Association membership includes almost one hundred choirs throughout Wales. We also have associate members in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, England, Northern Ireland, Canada and the US.

In the previous work on funding music education in schools, the Committee highlighted the importance of music to the culture and heritage of Wales. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the Welsh male choir tradition with histories stretching back 150 years and more, with the extraordinary talents of composers, musicians and singers produced by choirs over the years, and the often-unrecognised benefits provided by choirs to communities, families and individuals throughout Wales.

Impact on choirs of the Covid-19 outbreak

All member choirs suspended rehearsals and performances with the onset of the outbreak. The range of suspended activities included national massed choir festivals and charity concerts, as well as local concerts, foreign and home concert tours.

Choir recordings have also ceased as well as attendances at weddings, funerals and memorial services. Support for local community and charity events has been another victim of the restrictions due to the virus outbreak. However, in an effort to support residents in Care Homes, the WAMC has distributed over 300 CD's of its Massed Choir Concerts free of charge to those premises to provide some relief through music.

CD's have also been distributed to all hospital radio stations in Wales – again free of charge.

The consequences of the suspension of activities include:

- Reduction in financial support for local and national charities
- Reduction in music and cultural activities within local communities and impact on community cohesion
- Reduction in social activity for choir members – with consequential impact on mental and physical health
- Financial pressure on choirs because of reduced income
- Suppression of the profile of choral music in the musical aspects of Welsh culture
- Slowing down of the progress towards modernisation of recruitment, performance and repertoire in choirs

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- Financial impact on choirs with consequences on the income on musical directors and accompanists in some cases

Many of our member choirs have introduced activities to try to ameliorate some of the more negative consequences. I have attached anecdotal comments from WAMC member choirs which illustrate a range of these activities; in some cases, they also illustrate the difficulties being experienced by some colleagues.

Long term consequences

It is clear that the impact of the Covid-19 has had major consequences in the short term. In the longer term, choirs will face even greater challenges on a number of fronts. The key issues will include:

- Sadly, the demographic of membership of many choirs will challenge their very existence. It will be difficult to re-form, recover financial stability and reach an appropriate performance standard.
- Re-introducing a programme of choral activities within communities and nationally.
- Incorporating the new reality which will exist in future. It is clear that the arrangements for practise sessions and performances will be impacted by requirements for personal safety of both performers and audiences. At present it is impossible to assess the impact of future requirements but there are concerns over existing premises, both practise and performance; and whether social distancing and some PPE may be needed.

Support needed

- Access to funding to support those choirs who may need financial support to continue operating.

(Note: the early April funding from the Welsh Government for the support of cultural and sporting organisations was not available to our members)

- Financial support where alterations may be needed to premises
- Clear, unambiguous technical advice on when rehearsals/performances can start and under what conditions

The Welsh Association of Male Choirs will, of course, continue to support member choirs as we move forward. If the Committee requires any further information we would be delighted to provide it in writing or by providing oral evidence.

Chris Evans

Secretary

Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament

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Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Corau Meibion Cymru / Response from Welsh Association of Male Voice Choirs

May 2020

Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee

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Comments from member choirs of the Welsh Association of Male Choirs

April 2020

Cardiff . The choir, in common with others, is not meeting at the moment and concentrating in keeping us altogether online with quizzes, virtual cabaret and the complexity of preparing an online piece.

We recently had to take the decision to cancel our Autumn 2020 and Spring 2021 concerts based on realistic assessment of what will be possible in the future.

Abertillery We are attempting our first zoom chat tomorrow evening - md has sent all the parts for new song with piano accompaniment for us to practise
We also have a choir app where we keep in touch usually its usually nonsense to keep us sane and several choristers have posted videos to keep our spirits up.

Dyffryn Aman. We are not in the position to hold virtual rehearsals but we do keep in touch via What's App and we are grateful to those members who manage to find daily jokes to keep us amused.

The Phoenix Choir, Swansea. We are using Zoom and meeting online twice weekly as a means of keeping everyone in touch, making sure everyone is ok and for keeping spirits up. We have also had a little sing (although time lag makes singing during the meeting tricky unless everyone is muted. They sing to the keyboard accompaniment). One of the weekly sessions we have a music quiz.

Sound tracks have been posted online for choir members to sing along with independently whilst video recording themselves and then sending to the MD who will later compile them to make one video. We take screen shots of the session and post them up on our website and Facebook to let supporters know what we are doing. All words and music are posted up online for our new repertoire and the MD has sung and recorded all the parts so that choristers can practice and learn words etc. in their own home.

The MD has provided the choir with the backing track and music for Making Music's 'Bring me Sunshine' campaign and some of the choristers have sent him videos of themselves singing the song. They were encouraged to join in with 'Sing for Wales' singing the National Anthem on their doorstep to the radio broadcast.

The Board still meet regularly, albeit in a virtual meeting using Zoom and their duties continue.

All concerts, performances and normal rehearsals have obviously been cancelled or postponed.

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CWLC COV20

Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Corau Meibion Cymru / Response from Welsh Association of Male Voice Choirs

Unfortunately, not all of our choristers are able to use technology to join in and we are in the process of writing to those individuals to keep them informed and let them know that everyone sends them best wishes.

Mynydd Mawr. All choir activities suspended but individuals are contacting each other to ensure all are ok. I suspect all our houses and gardens will be looking about perfect by the end of this horrible period.

Ystradmynach. We stopped rehearsals at our discretion a week before lockdown due to our own concerns. We are all staying in touch so hopefully it won't be too long.

Caldicot Its very frustrating times, particularly with the liabilities of the choir hall and having had so much organised for the year. Hopefully we will get rates relief if nothing else. We were really lucky to get in a choir trip to Armagh as part of the St Patricks celebrations before the lockdown kicked in. We have been using Zoom for choir officer meetings but it has really only come down to keeping an eye on the finances. Our choir WhatsApp group is very busy and gets stuff put on it every day so people are keeping in touch. We also phone round those who are not on the system. Our Facebook site is also very active trying to keep people engaged.

Have been thinking about having a choir wide Zoom type evening. No good for a practise unless you like singing to yourself but may be good just to get people together socially.

Morlais Morlais like every other choir in the land, followed Government guidelines and shut down. We've had numerous concerts cancelled/postponed together with a number of Weddings, rescheduled for end of December and May 2021.

WhatsApp page has seen an endless stream of jokes and banter. Friday night is The Virtual Bar Night - thanks to Zoom. Despite having a number of choristers in isolation due to age / health, everyone is well at the moment.

Being the owners of our own rehearsal hall and with no income coming in, we have been fortunate in obtaining 2 grants to help with our over- heads. We also light the Morlais Hall Blue each Thursday evening in support of the NHS and frontline workers.

Being part of a choir certainly ensures you're never alone and I'm sure we're all looking forward to the day when we can get back to meeting and singing together once again.

Newport. As with most Choirs there is a lot of informal, ongoing contact between individual members during this period of restriction. Unfortunately, not all of our choristers are connected to the internet and/or technologically proficient. This hampers attempts to try jointly connected

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practices or meetings so we are using a combination of e-mail and land mail to circulate Newsletters updating members with developments and pointers towards music to be researched and familiarized with in anticipation of future events.

Unfortunately, we have lost four choristers in the past 6 weeks (two current and two former choristers), one of them directly attributable to Covid-19, so there is a lot of reactive rather than proactive content to our Newsletters though we are trying to keep choristers eyes looking forward as much as possible. Decisions will continue to be made in the light of developments as the days and weeks go by and as circumstances and restrictions allow but I would say that spirits are generally high and that when we do return there will be a renewed spring in the step/voice!!

Morrison RFC. With regard to choir activities during this period, we are holding a weekly Zoom get together and we have been publishing a weekly newsletter with contributions from choristers etc. Our musicians are currently looking at a form of on-line tutorial and we hope to be up and running with that soon.

Dyffryn Tywi. We as a choir are just speaking to each other either on the phone or by our What's App group. Have tried and experimented on holding a Rehearsal by using Zoom, but not much success as most of our members are rather old and the internet and Zoom was not an attractive option for them.

Have also cancelled our Annual Concert in July- not much choice.

However, we will survive although have lost one faithful member yesterday to this dreaded Virus.

Cwmann . Wedi derbyn diolch, Cor Meibion Cwmann a'r Cylch in lockdown until this is over. We try to contact members alternative weeks, some haven't got email, so i phone them.

Burry Port. We here in BP are just on a complete shut- down, far too many members who are technophobes lol. Most don't even have a mobile phone! Can't wait for everything to get back to normal. It's only at times like this you realise how much you normally cram into life. Look forward to better times and reacquainting ourselves.

Whitland We are managing quite well at the moment, we're like everybody else self- isolating and keeping well apart from everybody that comes along

Cor Meibion Caerfyrddin. Our choir suspended practices in mid- March until further notice. Looks like our trip to Belgium in June is cancelled also, as well as various performances we had lined up later in June.

When we will be able to convene again is anybody's guess at the moment.

Bois y Castell. Nothing happening with us at the moment.

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Cwmbach. Our rehearsals are on stop but we do meet virtually via Zoom on Mondays, Tenors at 7pm, basses at 8pm, for part practice and IMPORTANTLY, chat time!

Chepstow . Like many other choirs up and down the country we are finding ways of keeping in touch with choristers. For example, our Deputy MD has introduced the choir to Zoom and as a consequence has implemented a schedule of part practises using Zoom video conferencing to ensure the Choir keeps up to speed with the RAH 2021 repertoire. We are also organising quizzes to keep the brain active.

Risca. Like everyone else our committee meetings are on line via Zoom.

New music copies are being distributed by email (with links to YouTube for recordings to demonstrate the piece). Our MD then circulates individual section parts to help with note learning.

Lots of individual contact via Facebook and email but it's no substitute for meeting, singing and going for a pint together.

Talgarth. All rehearsals and engagements are postponed.

We are planning for a men's night away and concert in mid- July, but some choristers a bit reluctant to commit at present.

Cwm. Currently not practicing, but planning zoom meeting leading to zoom practice

Glynneath. As a choir, we are doing daily brainteasers and quizzes, and it is quite apparent that not only are the bass section the best singers, we are also the brains of the outfit.

Dowlais. Our choir is just now looking into the possibilities of online practices using Zoom – but one of the hurdles, of course, is that with so many elderly members many do not have the appropriate devices to be able to join in. Other than that, we are encouraging using the time to relearn words and parts on our own!

Neath. Unfortunately, I would report that the funerals took place yesterday and today of one of our 2nd bass and the wife of a top tenor (and chair of our Ladies Section). Both had underlying health issues but we still feel the loss greatly especially as we have been unable to attend the services and express our sympathies as we expect to do.

Times of late have been trying as we have experienced the same difficulties as most male choirs attempting to attract new members against stiff competition from so many alternative pastime activities. The present situation is, therefore, especially worrying as the advancing ages of our remaining members puts us firmly in the 'at risk' category and it may prove testing to renew

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enthusiasm when we are eventually allowed to congregate again, -but we remain hopeful and optimistic.

Tonna. We decided early on to 'cease and desist' in line with the government guidelines. So, we decided to cancel all concerts and rehearsals, at least until end August – which is a touch close to our annual concert date of mid-September – we'll have to see how we emerge from this crisis. Our choristers' age range starts at 26 (son of a chorister) , up to 89 years – so, we're going to have to be careful how to re-start, too

Tredegar. We as a committee did decide to close down for the foreseeable future before the lockdown came into force. We have rung around chorister to check on them.

Pontnewydd. It is good to hear that many choirs have grasped modern technology and managed to have online practices. Pontnewydd Male Choir have done the same and are currently having individual section practices twice a week. It is good to practice but also to see the smiling faces via Zoom and have much needed banter that always goes along with any practice session. We have not yet conquered how to hear everyone singing together as this may be too much for the technology with the various delays due to internet speed etc.

Tenby. The choir has suspended all activities until at least end of June but it looks as if our July programme will have to be shelved. Other than that, we are all well.

Pontypridd. Cor Meibion Pontypridd have gone into total lock down since 13th March 2020. We had a committee meeting and took our decision and it was unanimously decided to cancel all concerts and practice until further notice.

The choir Trustees are monitoring the situation and when we get confirmation from either the UK gov or Welsh assembly, then we will resume full choir activities.

Since lock down the choir which already has e-mail and FB, has initiated a WhatsApp forum so choristers can keep in touch we also have members who are checking on older members welfare.

Stay safe and hopefully we will all see this through and get back to singing soon as. We continue to work on our repertoire and Tour planning for May 2021.

Cardiff. We have been in shutdown mode since March 6th, 2 days prior to us due to sing in the Angel Hotel prior to the Wales v Scotland rugby game. We have not met since that evening. Ieuan, our MD, has been sending out a 30 - minute rehearsal for each section on Zoom. It is a very well put together video each week. Currently we are paying our MD and accompanist but it will be reviewed every month.

We are also having informal chorister meetings once a week on Zoom where we have a drink or two!!

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We may be producing a virtual recording of one of our items in the next few weeks.

Rhayader. We're managing OK – we've set up a Choir Newsletter on email and most are contributing. There are even some good jokes! Every 2 or 3 weeks I copy all the relevant bits onto a word document, print out about 16 copies and post them to those not on e-mail. I think we're all enjoying the emails – it's something to look forward to.

If I understand the official thoughts, we may be about the last to be 'un-locked'. Social gatherings!

Brecon. We are doing OK, we held our first Zoom Virtual Choir Practice, all on mute apart from the accompanist, but it was great to see everyone and it was a bit of fun to keep us all sane. Hope you are doing well during these times.

Bois Goetre Hen

Regarding our Choir activities - everything ceased following the UK Government's early announcement back in March however we have a couple of WhatsApp Groups which enables us all to 'keep in touch' without touching!!

The Committee have also experimented with a Zoom meeting the 2nd of which will be undertaken on Monday evening.

Thankfully nobody from the Choir has been affected.