

Response by National Dance Company Wales

I. Introduction – National Dance Company Wales

National Dance Company Wales (NDCWales) aims to produce dance that compares with the finest anywhere, acting as a strong voice to advocate for dance and the arts in Wales. We aim to demonstrate that modern Wales is a nation of cultural excellence by pushing the boundaries of what can be imagined on stages and opening up opportunities for people to express their lives through dance, with societal and health benefits for mind and body.

We're a contemporary dance repertory company – meaning that we create work by a range of different choreographers. Working with a company of skilled professional dancers, we create performances for all kinds of places – from Welsh theatres large and small to the Maes at the Eisteddfod, from European and International stages to online and screen projects, and from heritage settings to our home at the contemporary Wales Millennium Centre. Alongside our performances we run a growing programme of dance participation programmes in Wales. They're intended for young and old, for those who have never tried dance before, for dancers who want to develop their skills and artistry, and for people for whom dance is a therapeutic activity because of a condition or illness.

Some ways we deliver that work:

- Touring stages large and small in Wales: during 19/20 we performed in Pwllheli, Mold, Bangor, Caernarfon, Newtown, Aberdyfi, Aberystwyth, Llanrwst as part of the Eisteddfod, Narberth, Ystradgynlais, Swansea, Newport, Cardiff
- Enabling people of all ages to take part in dance through a network of 'Dance Ambassadors' across Wales, in partnership with venues in Mold, Bangor, Aberystwyth, Newtown, Swansea, Cardiff and Brecon, and our Dance for Parkinson's programmes
- International: in 19/20 we performed in Japan, Hong Kong, Germany, Austria, Spain
- Being a catalyst for innovation, researching new approaches for experiencing dance, sharing knowledge with the sector by inviting leading edge practitioners to Wales.

In 5 years, we have increased our reach four-fold, though we want to go much further, engaging all kinds of people in dance as audiences and participants, right across Wales.

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

The closure of arts venues across Wales meant that all performances and associated income for theatres and touring arts companies were lost. Theatre venues are highly dependent on ticket and ancillary income for their survival and without this many were, and are, in jeopardy. Like most producing arts companies, NDCWales is dependent on venues as partners for the touring and presentation of our work; our collaborative plans to develop new audiences and

participants for our work mean that the threat to venues is shared with the companies who regularly present work in these vital community hubs, as they represent our 'route to market'.

There is also a significant risk for freelance workers in the arts – of which there are many; organisations have been able to preserve payments to contracted freelancers, including where work is no longer taking place. At NDCWales we honoured all freelance contracts with artists, technicians, teachers and community dance workers.

For NDCWales, the most immediate impact was the loss of performances and associated income. The lockdown occurred when the Company was on tour, leading to a loss of:

- most of the Spring tour of Wales and the UK (10 venues)
- a touring collaboration with Welsh National Opera (4 venues)
- a tour in mid-May of Germany and Luxembourg (2 venues).

We sustained substantial touring and other income losses in the first quarter of the financial year (April-June), amounting to around £49,000 net. The impact in the 2nd and 3rd quarters is likely to be of a similar order as further performance engagements (and associated income) beyond the first quarter have been lost, including a summer tour in Wales of *Annwyl i Mi*, an outdoor dance work about rugby, and a season of work in Cardiff.

Like many companies, we're doing everything we can to bring our work to audiences in this very strange new reality. NDCWales is testing new approaches to digital work which had been scheduled for the Autumn. This has included creating short form videos, performance streaming, and workshops for our Dance for Parkinson's groups, and for children and young people. This valuable learning is informing future plans. The Company is about to launch a programme of digital commissions for poets and dancers in collaboration with Literature Wales to create short videos of poetry and dance, and further commissions for Wales-based independent dance artists working in the digital sphere.

3. How effectively has the support provided by the Welsh Government, the UK Government and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

The support offered by UK and Welsh Government is proving extremely helpful in enabling organisations to survive. The most important of these has been the Job Retention Scheme (JRS), of which the majority of organisations are making use. This has meant that to date there have been few, if any, redundancies in the arts sector. This will continue to be vital to sustain organisations until they can re-start their work with a highly dedicated staff team with the experience and skills to re-energise the arts sector when it is safe to do so. NDCWales has furloughed a minority of the staff team.

The emergency funding provided by ACW has been vital, and in the case of individuals in particular, was awarded speedily and to a high proportion of applicants, which has been very welcome. These are the artists and other workers that companies such as NDCWales depend on for future creativity and collaboration, and so their continued participation in the world of the arts is critical to us and others. The organisational funds are being awarded now to those affected in this first wave of the crisis; it is important that the level of awards made enable organisations to survive through the next 6-9 months.

However, the next wave of the crisis will be equally critical, as the cyclical nature of organisations' work means that the income losses and liquidity challenges will hit at different points in the financial year for different organisations.

At NDCWales, we've worked incredibly hard to make NDCWales less reliant on public funds: our Arts Council of Wales grant accounted for around 54% of turnover last year (down from over 80% 5 years ago). This vital support means that NDCWales has not had to request emergency funds from ACW. Despite significant losses sustained in the first quarter, we have been able to re-budget for 2020/21, dependent on some income generating activities take place later in the year. It is in the final quarter of the financial year when the touring income losses could be most critical.

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

Arts organisations' resilience has been seriously undermined. Business models which have seen diversification of income developed over many years have broken down; financial reserves have been significantly reduced, and the efficacy of business plans have been thrown into doubt. Quite apart from the risk to organisations' survival, this is a climate which could result in organisations showing a willingness to innovate less or take fewer risks, with resulting reductions in the ambition of the arts.

Performers are likely to return before audiences do, working in a socially distanced way at first. We are working with industry bodies, including One Dance UK, to inform a standard for dancers working in a studio, when the time is right.

Social distancing will seriously threaten organisations' viability as it will reduce income potential, from ticket sales and other income generating activity. Even when social distancing is relaxed, older audiences may be reluctant to return, further undermining viability. The make-up of audiences is likely to change, though how is very difficult to predict at present. Some segments of the population may be eager for live arts experiences again, but others will be fearful of mass gatherings.

When the schedule of returning to live performance is better understood, it is vital for organisations to undertake research and consultation with audiences and participants to gain insight into the ways in which different groups of people will respond to future arts activity, and to enable organisations to adapt their work to best fit interest and demand. Alongside many in the sector, NDCWales is currently undertaking consultation and research with its regular venues on their planning and thinking in this regard, with artists and freelance workers in Wales, and with audiences and participants. Some of this will be formal market research, and with others more informal consultation.

The impact on international working will be profound. Many companies (including NDCWales) have developed a business model dependent on income from overseas touring, and this is likely to be very slow to return, and may look very different when it does. This has

an impact on the arts' ability to showcase Wales in the world, and to create meaningful collaborations; NDCWales has lost touring in the EU this Spring, and there's a significant threat to future tours, including a major collaboration with South Korea in 2021.

For many organisations the Job Retention Scheme will remain vital for many months to their survival and in order to avoid extensive job losses in the sector. If social distancing means that few theatres are likely to return to normal for a year or more, a programme of support for these organisations and their staff is vital whether through the JRS, or other programmes of support. This is equally true of the scheme for freelance workers, which is due to come to an end in September; without further support many people who work freelance in the arts will have to look elsewhere for paid work, leading to a loss of creativity and resilience, meaning that recovery will be harder and take longer.

5. What lessons can be learnt from how the Welsh Government, the UK Government, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

The response by Welsh Government and Arts Council of Wales was swift, clear and appropriate. The time-lag between advice to avoid theatres and subsequent instruction to close by UK Government was unhelpful as it introduced doubt for audiences and organisations.

6. How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can the Welsh Government support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

Most arts organisations in Wales are dedicated to expanding and diversifying the number and range of people who take part in their activities. We are a relatively small, adaptable company. We perform in places that larger ensembles and companies cannot, and we are looking to explore new modes of performance that make use of that flexibility to reach new audiences.

Expanding and deepening our reach is at the core of our mission and purpose as organisations; Covid-19 and its disproportionate impact on the poorest and most socio-economically deprived in society sharpens that focus. The hiatus in normal operations can give the sector time to reflect and re-plan activity to ensure we succeed in our mission. The communal experience of being part of a live performing arts event, and the impact it can have on a community, should be a right for everyone in Wales; we will need healing, shared moments in order to fully recover from the impact of this virus.

This highlights the role that the arts has in addressing social justice and issues of diversity. We will strive to continue to engage board trustees, dancers and staff from diverse backgrounds, and engage with the broadest range of the population. The very real health threats to BAME communities coupled with societal disadvantage threaten the sector's work in this area.

It will be vital for the sector, funding agencies and Government can work in tandem to challenge barriers to engagement amongst all sectors of the population – as staff and board members in organisations, amongst audiences and participants, and the artists whose work we present. This will be vital to the healing process.

In 2022 there is due to be a UK-wide festival of arts and culture, led by the Commonwealth Games team based in Birmingham, the Festival of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with a reputed budget of £120 million. This resource could be used to co-create arts programmes activity involving communities, arts organisations and artists from across Wales working in collaboration, so that new locally-led, creative activity happens in every corner of Wales in 2022 or 2023, involving a wider range of people than before, to aid healing.

The results of research and consultation should inform new ways of working: this might entail delivering some activity (including participation) online, offering different ways of experiencing live work and changing touring patterns. For instance, there could be more work presented outdoors – however challenging that may be in a nation with high rainfall!

Continued support from Government and its agencies will be needed as organisations explore how to re-orient their operation to adapt to changing markets and practice. This could include supporting loss-making ‘test and learn’ activities whilst audiences build confidence and arts organisations adapt to new delivery methods. The sector will become more digitally-minded quickly, and has a role in helping people process and understand.

The arts sector is likely to adapt and change quickly in order that the arts will become more accessible overall – but it will need momentum and it will need financial support to make sure we can continue to innovate. These might include streaming capabilities in all homes, new systems to watch shows online or to engage in the arts digitally and raise the profile of smaller producers, entailing the need for new training and sharing expertise.

Relying on digital streaming to share our work has highlighted that many in Wales are disadvantaged due to digital exclusion. For instance, many of our Dance for Parkinson’s participants in Cardiff and Blackwood do not have the equipment or connectivity to take part; we’ve been able to share classes on DVD, but this can only work for small numbers. The work of Digital Communities Wales is important in mitigating the effect of this exclusion, especially for the most marginalised in society.

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