

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 COV56

Ymateb gan unigolyn/ Response from an individual

**Welsh Parliament Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee call for evidence on the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications and sport**

**Written evidence submitted by Andrew Miller**

**1. About me**

**1.1** I am a cultural consultant and broadcaster. This evidence is submitted in a personal capacity. The evidence is drawn from my experience in a number of current roles as UK Government Disability Champion for Arts & Culture, National Council member of Arts Council England & The Arts Council of Wales, Chair of the British Film Institute Disability Advisory Forum & as a founder of UK Disability Arts Alliance #WeShallNotBeRemoved

**2. Why I am responding**

**2.1** Disabled people working across the creative industries in the Wales are exceptionally impacted by Coronavirus and are deeply concerned about their future. The pandemic threats to health, livelihoods, social care and creativity are all frighteningly magnified for disabled people. Our stories have been largely invisible in the national discourse and response to the pandemic. It is therefore important for the Committee to understand the unique circumstances faced by disabled people in the cultural sector.

**2.2** According to the Office of National Statistics (ONS), disabled people make up 21% of UK population. The term “disabled” in the context of that statistic (and this evidence) covers people who are D/deaf, neurodiverse, have learning or physical disabilities.

**2.3** According to Arts Council England’s February 2020 Equalities and Diversity Statistics report on the make-up of National Portfolio Organisations (NPO), disabled people make up 5% of NPO Chairs, 6% of the workforce, 7% of trustees and 12% of audiences. The workforce figures for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland amount to an average of 2%. Whilst under-representation of disability in the sector is systemic, most disabled creative practitioners operate as self-employed freelancers. Freelancers make up an estimated 70% of the creative industries workforce, of whom 13% can be assumed to live with disability using the ONS national disabled workforce indicator.

**2.4** The last decade has seen a flowering of disabled people’s talent in every artform and in every capacity. Increasing levels of inclusion across the cultural mainstream have been supported by visionary public funding, creating a vibrant sub-sector ecology. At the

2018 Unlimited Symposium, Arts Council England CEO Darren Henley described disabled artists as making “*some of the boldest most aesthetically adventurous art out there*”. The UK is also a recognised global leader in disability arts. All this progress is threatened by the pandemic.

### **3. Summary of Evidence**

**3.1** Disabled people working across the creative industries in Wales & the UK are exceptionally impacted by Coronavirus and are deeply concerned about their future.

**3.2** Whilst under-representation of disability in the sector is systemic, most disabled creative practitioners operate as self-employed freelancers. The ending of SEISS in August threatens long term sustainability of creative disabled people’s careers.

**3.3.** Disabled artists have been impacted by severe anxiety as a result of seeing livelihoods disappear, personal independence compromised, struggles to secure essentials such as food and appropriate care and now also face the traumatic prospect of long term shielding.

**3.4** Disabled artists demonstrated remarkable leadership at the onset of the crisis by sharing strategies for self-isolation and working from home publicly to support their mainstream colleagues experiencing these conditions for the first time.

**3.5** The Arts Council of Wales responded with speed to the crisis and included sums to support disabled artists’ additional access costs to emergency funding packages.

**3.6** DCMS officials responded swiftly to ascertain the key issues disabled artists were experiencing at the onset of the crisis and worked cross-departmentally to assist. This should continue particularly on Access to Work which is an essential and hitherto unrecognised element of arts funding.

**3.7** It will be essential to maintain the JRS & SEISS schemes for industries required to operate on reduced capacity (such as arts & entertainment) and to specifically protect disabled people’s jobs and self-employment.

**3.8** Shielding disabled artists may experience long term inequalities when lockdown for the general population eases and risk being marginalised whilst recovery begins.

**3.9** It will be essential for the DCMS Recovery & Renewal Taskforce to have adequate disabled representation to make the case for revised approaches to access and risk.

**3.10** Under the provisions of The Equality Act, all decisions of the DCMS Recovery & Renewal Taskforce must be subject to rigorous Equality Impact Assessments.

**3.11** Enhanced access and safety measures together with other incentives will be needed to encourage disabled people back into the habit of live cultural event attendance when it is safe for us to do so. Important also for the sector, as disabled people make up 12% of the national audience in England.

**3.12** Welsh Government should recognise that renewal offers the opportunity to reset long standing discriminatory access issues in arts and culture and should consider linking any additional emergency funding to inclusive targets.

**3.13** Welsh Government should proactively engage with The Cabinet Office's development of the National Disability Strategy to support disabled people's participation in culture through and after the pandemic.

**3.14** Welsh Government should support the development of a National Disability Charter to further remove barriers from disabled people's participation in culture.

**3.15** Welsh Government should take pride in the Arts Council of Wales *Hynt* scheme which has offered the UK a model for a National Arts Access Scheme to further remove barriers from disabled people's participation in culture.

**3.16** Creative disabled people are at the forefront of evolving national attitudes to disability and any reversal of inclusion now could negatively impact the positive and accepting trajectory of perceptions in wider society.

#### **4. What has been the immediate impact of Coronavirus on the sector?**

**4.1** In the immediate aftermath of lockdown many disabled creative practitioners suffered severe anxiety from the lack of disability specific information in relation to the direct threat the Coronavirus posed to people with multiple health conditions. Together with the sudden impact of shielding, many struggled with sourcing essentials such as food and arranging appropriate social care. Most creative livelihoods disappeared overnight, training has gone and disabled artists have moved from being a linked community

grounded by performance spaces and galleries into siloed individuals held together by variably accessible internet communication.

**4.2** Whilst not culture-specific, the Committee should be aware that the general psychological impact of the pandemic on disabled people has been profound. Disabled people have spent the last five decades emerging proudly out of the medical model of disability and into the social model, actively contributing to society in myriad ways. Indeed the Disability Arts Movement of the 1980s led wider society in this respect. The epidemic has forced a wholesale retreat, with most of us shielding and likely to continue doing so way after social distancing measures are eased for the general population. This leads to the risk of disabled creative practitioners being invisible from society for an extended period of time and once again becoming narratives of 'pity' and 'vulnerability'.

**4.3** Recent surveys of the general disabled population, taken since the pandemic began depict a very worrying narrative in relation to disabled people:

- According to the ONS more disabled adults said they were "very worried" about the effects of coronavirus on their lives than non-disabled adults (45.1% compared with 30.2%)
- ONS also reported that nearly two-thirds of disabled people said Coronavirus-related concerns were affecting their wellbeing; from loneliness and problems at work to worsening mental health
- On 27 April, *The Guardian* reported that one in ten adults with a disability reported often or always feeling lonely in the previous seven days, compared with less than one in twenty non-disabled adults.
- A survey by the Disability Consortium found nine out of ten disabled people are struggling with additional food costs, with others unable to pay for medicine collections or their rising utility bills as they shield at home.
- A study by the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers shows almost half of disabled people are currently concerned about access to medicine. Two in five are "extremely concerned" about making medical appointments.
- Unlike the general population, many disabled people aren't able to pop out for an hour of fresh air and exercise, while others can't even access social media or meeting platforms; a survey by the Glasgow Disability Alliance found just a third of disabled people having access to home broadband during the pandemic.

**4.4** In practice, disabled artists responded to the crisis by quickly moving online. Leadership for the mainstream sector was offered through sharing experiences and coping strategies of self-isolation - a common experience for many disabled people. Most disability arts organisations shifted their entire focus to support local communities

with food deliveries and assistance with emergency funding applications for individuals. But the shift online has brought its own challenges in terms of tech, access to software and training, privacy, access (captioning etc) and also making space for disabled artists amongst the clamour of everyone else being online.

**4.5** Critically, most disabled artists have lost their main income streams and many projects have been shelved or cancelled. This is particularly problematic for freelancers who have been developing projects, as they won't get paid for this aspect of the work. Work is only paid from after the funding is agreed, so several years work of partnerships and project development may be lost.

**4.6** As yet ONS have not published any figures relating to the direct impact of Coronavirus on disabled people. We do not yet understand the transmission rates or death toll in relation to specific disabilities. But persistent references in the media to deaths of "people with underlying health conditions" suggest the impact of Coronavirus on the disabled community could be dramatically significant.

## **5. How effectively has the support provided by Welsh Government, UK Government and arm's length bodies addressed the sector's needs?**

**5.1** Emergency funding streams swiftly established by Arts Council England (ACE) & The Arts Council of Wales (ACW) explicitly aimed not to disadvantage disabled applicants. Many disabled people were concerned by the immediate loss of project grant programmes to make way for the emergency funds. However, assistance was offered in making applications and additional access funds made available (£500 in England and up to £2,000 in Wales) together with two separate programme deadlines to support those not able to make immediate applications. No statistics are yet available to demonstrate the success of these funds in reaching disabled applicants or success rates for disabled applicants but these should be scrutinised when available. ACE have subsequently set up a number of round table discussions which have sought to include disabled representation. In Wales, ACW have framed a new dialogue with the arts sector addressing issues of equality, diversity and social justice.

**5.2** DCMS officials were swift to engage with disabled artists and creative practitioners, arranging a conference call on 23 March through *What Next* to explore the key issues being experienced by the sector and then ensuring that these issues were presented to the Minister for Arts in a subsequent sector briefing call. DCMS officials committed to work cross-departmentally with the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) to address

issues disabled artists were experiencing with the Access to Work benefit - a critical support mechanism for many disabled people working in the sector. This was followed up on a further call and DCMS officials were able to report on their progress including some changes to the Access to Work scheme announced by DWP on 11 May. This intervention was proactive and greatly helpful to disabled people in the sector and also represents the first formal recognition of the vital importance of Access to Work in the arts funding ecology.

**5.3** The Job-Retention Scheme announced by the Chancellor has been of immense value to the cultural sector including disability & inclusive arts organisations, protecting disabled people's jobs.

**5.4** The Self-Employed Support Scheme (SEISS) has been particularly welcome to the freelance disabled creative workforce. There are however, particular problems for the recently self-employed (including all those who graduated last summer) who are ineligible and, in particular, those many people in our industry who have portfolio careers, where they are both PAYE and self-employed. Many of these people have seen their PAYE income drop by 20% and their self-employed income cease completely, and if the portion of their self-employed income is less than 50% the SEISS scheme is not available to them. Others who were perhaps unwell, or caring at some point the last 3 years will have found themselves ineligible due to their low income or lack of tax return.

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

**6.1** The long term issues emanating from this crisis for disabled people in the cultural sector are complex and highly uncertain. As suggested in 4.2, many disabled people face long term shielding due to the threat of Coronavirus to our health, until the virus is under control or a vaccine becomes available. In this the fate of many disabled people is mirrored with those cultural activities dependent on large scale public gatherings.

**6.2** Whilst the majority of the population remain in lockdown, there is a degree of equality shared with those shielding. However once measures are eased on the general population and various degrees of normality are returned, the inequalities facing those shielding will emerge. There is a high degree of risk attached here for disabled artists who may feel forgotten, increasingly isolated, or left behind as the recovery takes place around them but without them.

**6.3** For disabled people in the creative industries, this requires planning for recovery to be based around inclusive principles. It is essential that there is adequate representation of the disabled creative community throughout the structure and process of the Secretary of State's Renewal & Recovery Taskforce, led by Neil Mendoza.

And equally important that disabled cultural leaders are actively consulted and listened to within this process. Failure to do so, could lead to a perception of disabled people being used as window dressing whilst decision making takes place that unintentionally excludes us. Therefore to demonstrate both good practise and to comply with the requirements of The Equality Act (2010), equalities impact assessment and monitoring should be applied to all the decisions of the Taskforce.

**6.4** Many disabled artists are concerned about whether partner venues and presenting organisations will survive to re-opening. There is a compelling need to sustain small and medium sized venues and platforms so that work by disabled artists can be presented and toured again.

**6.5** Further investment will be needed by the sector to make digital activity and events properly accessible, including British Sign Language, captioning, audio description etc.

**6.6** We do not yet know how audiences will respond to the public health crisis, but early indications are that people in the UK are feeling particularly anxious about indoor public assembly. In a recent survey, *After the Interval: When will audiences return to live events and venues after lockdown?* taken in April 2020 by Indigo Consulting suggested 80% of audiences are concerned about returning to attending live events. Indigo will identify the UK benchmark for disabled audiences' response later in the summer.

However the May 2020 Australia Council Audience Outlook report suggests that whilst 85% of Australians were ready to return to small public assemblies, most disabled people were not (in a country far less severely affected by the pandemic). It seems highly likely that enhanced safety measures coupled with incentives will be needed to draw possibly reluctant disabled audiences back into the habit of live event attendance. As disabled people account for 12% of the national audience for cultural events in England, this is a significant and vital challenge for the sector to address.

**6.7** Coronavirus threatens skills and diversity in our industry. As always, those with protected characteristics are likely to be hit hardest by the financial impacts of the pandemic. DCMS and devolved government culture departments across the UK will have to work closely with DWP, arts councils and other departments to address this inequality and ensure that the progress made by the sector continues. As illustrated in

5.2 Access to Work is a vital component of cultural funding, enabling the careers of many thousands of disabled creative practitioners.

**6.8** To maintain the world-leading diversity of UK culture and to protect disabled people's jobs and freelance roles, both the Job Retention Scheme and Self-Employed Income Support Scheme need to extend beyond the current cut-off periods set by the Treasury, for as long as restrictions on public assembly remain. Additionally some sort of universal basic income should be made available for the many self-employed creative practitioners who are ineligible for SEISS. Failure to do so could lead to a catastrophic loss of disabled talent for the sector and potential long term unemployment for disabled creatives.

**6.9** Local authorities, who are major funders of the arts, will be under increased funding pressure post-Coronavirus as rightly, health and social care services will need greater investment, reducing available spend elsewhere. As culture is not a statutory requirement this crucial investment is particularly at risk, adding to the vulnerability of the sector and will need support from central Government.

## **7. What lessons can be learnt from how the Welsh Government, UK Government and arm's length bodies and the sector have dealt with Coronavirus?**

**7.1** The UK Government should have mandated the closure of public venues earlier than was done, clearly and unambiguously, rather than just implying they should. The health implications on the disabled workforce and audience, of not acting sooner could yet prove profound.

**7.2** The DCMS Renewal & Recovery Taskforce needs to ensure that clear communication is in place with the entire sector to enable reopening plans to be delivered smoothly and inclusively. As identified in 6.3 it will be essential to maintain disabled creative practitioners' confidence in the process of recovery, which requires that Equalities Impact Assessment and Monitoring is applied to all the key decisions of the Taskforce and ensuring that disabled people's views are taken into consideration.

**7.3** To enable disabled people to once again safely engage in cultural events as a workforce and as audiences will require clear guidance from Government. Plans need to be put in place for those who will be required to self-isolate beyond the immediate lockdown period to address: protecting jobs, financial support, access to social and medical care, essential supply deliveries and protection of rights to independent living.

**7.4** DCMS should continue to work with DWP to examine how the Access to Work Benefit can be adapted and streamlined to support creative disabled people who continue to work from home through this crisis. As established in 5.2, Access to Work is a vital if often overlooked element of public arts funding. The process of renewals, new claims and the retrospective nature of the Access to Work leaves disabled people especially vulnerable to having the service of their carers, support workers, PA's and interpreters withdrawn as many organisations reduce their operations. Support workers could become sick themselves or need to self-isolate and disabled people may need to quickly source and hire others. Consideration also needs to be given to offering upfront rather than retrospective Access to Work payments with minimal bureaucracy.

## **8. How might the sector evolve after Coronavirus, and how can the Welsh Government support such innovation to deal with future challenges?**

**8.1** The crisis provides an opportunity to bring about lasting and systemic change to improve the inclusivity of the sector. In many ways the industry that closed in March did not work for many disabled people - as artists, as employees or as audiences. Access and opportunity for disabled people throughout the sector remained patchy and incomplete. The real opportunity offered by "renewal" is to address long standing issues of equality, diversity and social justice in terms of who is able to enjoy and take part in culture. Whilst venues are closed, funding should be made available for capital works to better adapt them for disabled people, including changing places toilets, better backstage and front of house access etc. These essential works could proceed without any additional loss of income.

**8.2** The sector will need to establish safe and welcoming routes to indoor assembly and sharing space that will inspire confidence in disabled audiences - 12% of the total national audience in England. This will require reconsidering traditional cultural models. Equally the sector needs to consider how to cater for those of us who may remain shielding from the virus in ways that can allow us to continue to "be present" whilst not attending in person.

**8.3** DCMS through its Taskforce and working groups has an opportunity to shape the future of the sector. It appears inevitable additional emergency funding will be required from government to safeguard the future of UK culture and this could be linked to certain desirable outcomes including those set out in Arts Council Wales's *For the Benefit of All*. Outcomes such as further inclusive practise, improved access, expansion of digital work,

securing widespread equality and inclusion, better routes to inclusive training, developing arts practise to improve mental health and to re-examine the fragility in our labour markets particularly for self-employed disabled people.

**8.4** The UK Government announced in the December Queen's Speech that it was introducing a National Disability Strategy to be developed across Government and coordinated by The Cabinet Office. This initiative is welcome and its delivery should be prioritised, particularly in light of the impact of Coronavirus. If appropriately funded, the Strategy could become a key policy tool in supporting the re-integration of disabled people back into society when the pandemic is over. The Strategy should take into account the distressing experience of disabled people during the epidemic, ensure appropriate lessons are learnt by a range of public bodies and services; and that disabled people are comprehensively consulted and involved in all areas of the recovery. So much is changing it will be essential for government to make sure that everyone is a part of the "new normal" and that understanding of the disabled experience is built into everyday life. So everything we design, should be designed for everybody, so that we don't have to retrofit access later on at a greater expense.

**8.5** To remove barriers for disabled people wishing to re-engage with culture after Coronavirus, DCMS should actively consider supporting two initiatives which I have been campaigning as Disability Champion, either for direct implementation or as part of the National Disability Strategy. These are:

- a National Disability Cultural Charter to enshrine the rights of disabled artists, employees and audiences, that directly links public funding of cultural organisations to inclusive outcomes
- a new agency that for the first time champions and represents disabled audiences. Offering best practise training to the arts sector to improve the customer experience, delivering a seamless and effective UK wide National Arts Access Scheme for venues and for audiences, building on the success of the Arts Council of Wales' *Hynt* scheme. Such a scheme will establish an industry standard for ticketing to enable free essential companion tickets, streamline concessions to disabled customers and offer online wheelchair bookings (which are currently not offered by the majority of UK venues)

**8.6** On the other side of the epidemic, once recovery is underway, it will never have been more vital for our culture to engage positively with disabled people, providing ease of access and making disabled artists, employees and audiences once more welcome in publicly funded venues, museums and galleries. That happy outcome may be some time

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away, but planning must be undertaken now and all possible barriers to engagement removed. Through television, film and the arts, creative disabled people are at the forefront of evolving attitudes to disability and any reversal of inclusion now could deeply impact the positive and accepting trajectory of perceptions in wider society.

**24 June 2020**