

The impact of COVID-19 on youth arts training in Wales

Culture, Welsh Language and
Communications Committee

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About National Youth Arts Wales

1. National Youth Arts Wales is the national charity for gifted and talented actors, dancers and musicians aged 16 – 22 throughout Wales. Every year we work with around 900 young people, through exceptional training and performance opportunities in the arts.
2. Until 2017, the artistic leadership of NYAW was shared by WJEC and Ty Cerdd, however in October 2017 all six national youth ensembles (theatre, dance, orchestra, choir, brass band, wind orchestra) in Wales were united under one organisation – National Youth Arts Wales Ltd. National Youth Arts Wales is a registered charity (no. 1170643), and is part of Arts Council for Wales' portfolio of regularly funded organisations.
3. Since its formation in 2017, NYAW has expanded its work beyond the six national youth ensembles, and now produces a variety of development projects designed to improve access to high-level training. This includes Music Futures, Wales's first national mentoring scheme for rock and pop musicians in schools.
4. NYAW also provides youth employment opportunities, including an annual Trainee Producer scheme, paid at the Real Living Wage, designed to help young graduates from lower-income families to join the creative industries workforce. We also employ nearly 300 freelancers each year to help deliver our programme of activity across Wales.
5. NYAW is committed to ensuring that financial circumstances are not a barrier to participation. Each year, NYAW provides bursaries for a significant number of the young participants, and our development projects are free at the point of access.

Immediate Impacts of COVID-19

6. Young people have had their artistic training seriously disrupted by social distancing, which has cancelled almost all face-to-face artistic training. Just like elite athletes, young talented performers need to be performing and practicing constantly to maintain a high standard and to strive towards a professional career.

7. Whilst schools have been able to operate in some settings, arts provision will inevitably have been limited. NYAW has had to cancel all face-to-face activity since March 2020, including its annual summer residencies.
8. We feel that there has been some disparity between elite arts training and elite sports training. Whilst travel for elite sports training was permitted under government guidelines, this didn't extend to elite young artists.
9. National Youth Arts Wales has worked hard to provide digital training opportunities and workshops, as have many arts training providers, but this will never be the same as face-to-face training, which is essential for the development of a performer. This is particularly true for music ensembles, which simply can't be replicated live across video conferencing software due to sound quality and time lagging.
10. Based on the information currently available, National Youth Arts Wales will have to continue to operate in a different way during 2021. This includes the cancellation of our face-to-face summer residencies for the second year running. As well as the financial impact this will have on us as a charity, it is also devastating for our young members. We fear that many will lose their confidence as performers and some may drop out of the sector altogether. We are working hard to continue and expand our programme of digital workshops to try to avoid this happening.

Our Digital Projects

11. From the outset of the pandemic, it was clear that digital training could be used as a stopgap measure, but it would never be able to replicate live performance in a theatre or concert hall. As our members have become more accustomed to digital learning, we have experimented with projects designed specifically for digital, but this cannot replicate the experience that members would have face-to-face.
12. Despite the challenges that the pandemic has presented us, we have still been able to deliver **around 300 digital sessions and workshops** since April 2020.
13. These sessions have been provided free-of-charge to the young participants. Whilst expenditure for our digital programme is lower than our face-to-face residencies, these still provide a substantial amount of employment for freelance tutors and artists.

14. Our digital projects are interactive and practical and give opportunities for young people to continue their training, to collaborate together with new artists, and to explore new works or genres that they might not otherwise experience. Examples of projects that have worked well over the past few months include:
 - a. Digital workshops shared between National Youth Dance Wales members and National Youth Dance Company of Scotland – where both youth companies can benefit from masterclasses from world-class artists whilst also participating in a “cultural exchange” between both countries.
 - b. A new Zoom play reading club for National Youth Theatre of Wales, where members get to prepare a rehearsed reading of a much broader range of theatre repertoire, written by writers from diverse backgrounds, and normally including a live Q+A from the writers about their career.
 - c. For our music ensembles, digital interactive masterclasses by internationally renowned artists, including baritone Roderick Williams, baroque violinist Rachel Podger and folk artist Patrick Rimes.
 - d. A new creative partnership with inclusive theatre company Hijinx Theatre, where NYTW members have formed an integrated cast alongside learning disabled and/or autistic artists.
 - e. The first digital sessions of Music Futures 2021, our contemporary music development project, where six mentors have been paired with schools across Wales ahead of a digital residency in April.
 - f. A series of wellbeing workshops, including social sessions between members, digital yoga classes, and practical introductions to Sophrology, to help members to focus on their own physical and mental health needs during this difficult time for young people.
 - g. One-to-one mentoring between our music members and players from BBC National Orchestra of Wales, and wider discussions with artists including their Principal Conductor Ryan Bancroft about diversity in classical music.
15. With our 2021 face-to-face residencies not going ahead, we will be planning a wide variety of digital-first projects instead, with exciting new pieces created with digital media in mind. These projects for each ensemble will focus on the huge potential for collaboration that digital can provide, rather than attempting to replicate a face-to-face experience.

16. For National Youth Theatre of Wales, their 2021 season (*Manifest*) will include a series of youth takeovers, new commissions and collaborations, exploring youth empowerment and encouraging young people to vote, as 16- and 17- year olds prepare to vote in the Senedd Cymru elections for the first time.
17. A significant number of young people will have had their confidence damaged by the lack of face-to-face training, or are suffering from poor mental health, and so we have invested time and resource to ensure that our members have access to digital wellbeing sessions as well as practical training.
18. Young people have told us that our digital workshops are a lifeline at a time when all arts training has been put on hold – but that they are not a long-term replacement for face-to-face training.

Financial Support

19. Since the start of the pandemic, National Youth Arts Wales has received emergency financial support from the UK Government's Job Retention Scheme, Welsh Government's Economic Resilience Fund, and Arts Council of Wales's Cultural Recovery Fund. This has been in addition to our regular funding from Arts Council Wales.
20. After facing a sudden loss of income due to the pandemic (c. 50% of turnover), this emergency financial support was crucial to ensuring that there have been no job losses or substantial depletion of our restricted reserves so far. NYAW found the process of claiming emergency funding relatively straightforward, and we continue to have a very positive relationship with our regular funders. Some of this emergency financial support provided additional employment to our community of freelancers, through our digital projects.
21. Whilst we are immensely grateful for the support received in 2020-2021, NYAW is still facing a shortfall of income due to summer 2021's cancelled activity. We understand that discussions are underway regarding a "Cultural Recovery Fund 2" and we would urge the Committee, and the Welsh Government, to consider this option seriously.
22. We are also extremely concerned for the financial security of freelance artists, some of whom have had no financial support at all during the crisis, and many

of whom tell us they have found it difficult to navigate the limited support on offer.

Long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the sector

23. We already know that the economic impact of the pandemic will be felt most sharply by lower-income families, and we fear that this will be particularly true in arts training. Young performers with a disability are also more likely to have been affected by physical and mental health problems during lockdown, particularly if they have had to shield. Without specific support for these groups, this could slow down existing work to help diversify the arts sectors.
24. We fear that a large number of young people will lose confidence in their performing abilities, or even drop out of the sector altogether due to lack of confidence, when in fact they have been impacted by exceptional circumstances. We will be continuing our digital wellbeing strands and work to prevent performance anxiety, but this will need additional support from other partners.
25. We also fear that when schools are able to catch up, that they might be tempted to prioritise STEM subjects or humanities over creative subjects. This could have a hugely negative impact on those who aim to work within the creative industries. When social distancing restrictions are eased, we would urge the education sectors to work with us to ensure that young performers are able to catch up with music, dance and drama education, to safeguard their future careers.
26. We have learned a lot during this pandemic about how digital projects can be used to our advantage, rather than as a temporary stopgap. We hope that digital projects will continue beyond this pandemic, as a way of bringing together young people and artists from across Wales and beyond – but young performers cannot train for their future careers without intensive face-to-face training. We sincerely hope that this can restart as soon as is feasibly possible.