

P-06-1455 Protect the junior departments of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama from closure – Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Committee, 20 June 2024

Impact of the Potential Closure of Young RWCMD

The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama are proposing the closure of its junior department, which provides the highest level of specialist education in these subjects in Wales each weekend in term time. The closure is to take effect from the end of this term. 112 staff will suffer redundancy and around 400 students will immediately lose their lessons.

Approximately 50% of these students receive bursaries, many of them paying minimal or no fees. If the department closes these bursaries will no longer be available and many young people will find that accessing music or drama training suitable for their needs will become unaffordable.

Staff were told on 8th May that the department was likely to be closing on 13th July, leaving only eight more teaching weeks before the end of term. These students devote a whole day each week to this education; some have been attending for many years. This is a big commitment, and they care very deeply about the contribution Young RWCMD makes to their lives.

Over the past weeks parents have spoken to us of their worries for their children's wellbeing if the closure goes ahead: many are already experiencing anxiety over the proposals. The community of like-minded, talented young musicians and actors the YRWCMD creates for children across Wales (only 34% of students on the advanced level music courses are from Cardiff, some travel from Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, even from across the border in Bristol, Oxford and Somerset) is irreplaceable.

Alongside this community, music students receive exceptionally high-level individual tuition, musicianship lessons (these include aural, improvisation and composition training in musical styles including classical, jazz, Indian and music from around the world), chamber/ensemble coaching and orchestral tuition, specialist classes in keyboard, voice, harp, jazz, theory, performance practice, concerts, events, and specialist careers advice and mentoring. The curriculum follows the structure of the Curriculum for Wales. The ethos is highly supportive and built firmly around the young people's needs. Many of the students have

additional needs and the department ran a scheme for visually impaired and blind children in past years. Drama students benefit from tuition led by industry specialists, and not only develop skills in acting but also theatre design and devising. Elements of the provision offered are bilingual, and lessons and workshops are delivered by professional musicians and actors who are also able to assist in smoothing the student's transition from junior department to higher education and beyond, into the professions.

The RWCMD suggests that the National Music Service will be there to support these students who will have had their artistic education so abruptly removed, and indeed, many of the music students began their musical lives through the incredible lessons provided by the music services in schools and music centres. The pathway from these invaluable starting points available across Wales is rightly provided through its national conservatoire, which not only provides the best possible facilities (a purpose built concert hall and theatre, soundproofed practice rooms and world-class Steinway pianos throughout the building as well as high quality instruments to loan) where means-tested scholarships are available to all, but also access to other talented students from across the country and the most inspiring, experienced teaching staff. Wales's National Music Service is of course fundamental, but it cannot provide equivalent opportunities. If the Young RWCMD is closed, Wales's national conservatoire will be the only UK conservatoire without a junior department, and arguably, the only conservatoire in the world without a full junior provision. This will leave Welsh children at a profound disadvantage to their English and Scottish counterparts

The National Music and Dance Scheme in England offers government funded, means-tested bursaries of up to £3000 to around 40 children per junior conservatoire. Whilst the fund is not available in Scotland, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland had access to a substantial Transitions fund within its junior conservatoire, and other government funds prior to that. Also, there is a funded specialist music school in Scotland, St Mary's in Edinburgh.

There is no parity of funding for the junior department of the RWCMD. It currently receives no government funding. Course fees pay for all delivery costs plus a good proportion of course lead, support and administrative costs which is currently in the region of £200,000 a year. Access to a bursary scheme equivalent to the MDS, alongside some modest remodelling and a push for slightly higher recruitment

figures could make the junior departments a fully sustainable part of the RWCMD financially.

The RWCMD is saying that it is subsidising the junior departments from their reserves, and that economic struggles in Higher Education and beyond mean they are no longer able to do so. It is unfair for the crisis of HE funding and recruitment to impact on the opportunities for under 18s. Wales currently sends many of its young actors and musicians to study at degree level in music and drama colleges throughout the country and internationally. So many of these have passed through Young RWCMD. These students are the best advertisement for Wales's fantastic arts industry. We will lose so many of these talented young people from the professions if this closure is allowed to happen.

In addition to those students who move away post 18, many remain in Wales and study at the senior department of the RWCMD. By removing the junior departments there will also be a new issue with recruitment for Wales's national conservatoire.

Often proudly patriotic and political, the students affected by this proposed closure have been fighting hard for the continuation of the Young RWCMD, in many cases doing so while taking their A level exams. Students who are moving on to higher education in September have fortunately been able to capitalise on the opportunities provided by the YRWCMD throughout their formative years, and they want future generations of Welsh children to be able to do the same.

The Young RWCMD sees nearly 100% of its students moving on to higher education, all of whom go on to promote the Welsh arts in their varied places of education and future professions, many also promoting the Welsh language.

With the ecosystem of Welsh arts already threatened by cuts to Welsh National Opera, we are set to make another huge loss to our national identity if the young people of Wales no longer have access to a junior department at their national conservatoire.