

What is the current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on your sector, and what further support is needed from the Welsh and UK Governments both to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and enable the post-pandemic recovery?

The COVID-19 pandemic is still seriously impacting on the wider arts and cultural sector in Wales. For Literature Wales – the national company for the development of literature – much of our work revolves around audiences and face-to-face activities. These include community participation, writer visits to schools, creative workshops, residential courses, and live literature events for audiences of all sizes across the country. The majority of these activities were not able to go ahead under normal circumstances over the past 18 months. However, like many industries, the arts have found new and innovative ways of reaching our clients and audiences. Taking part in creative reading and writing has been clinically proven to be beneficial to our wellbeing, and literature is an exceptional tool for positively addressing many of the social issues amplified during the pandemic. Being able to work digitally and deliver content in new settings and on new platforms, has in many ways allowed us to extend our reach and made many of our work more accessible. However, at the same time, digital work has excluded those with no access to broadband, suitable hardware or confident digital skills.

Many organisations, festivals and producing venues have quickly adapted and shifted their output and productions to digital platforms and have attracted impressive audience figures, for example our Tŷ Newydd Writing Centre digital taster courses attracted 259 participants and our weekly writing challenges by the Children's Laureate Wales and Bardd Plant Cymru received 156 interactions in total. Developing our partnership working has also been crucial during this time. For instance, deepening our relationship with BBC Radio Cymru and BBC Radio Wales to collaborate on the announcements of the Wales Book of the Year Awards shortlist and winners succeeded in reaching a wider audience for both the awards and the books celebrated, and our Plethu/Weave collaboration with the National Dance Company share joyous examples of how words and movements can intertwine and complement each other.

As many other organisations, Literature Wales was quick to act when the first lock-down began, adapting and changing most of our ongoing and planned activities, and targeting support to those who would need it most. A new series of open call-out Writer Commissions were launched, inviting freelance writers and literary facilitators to apply for a pot of money ranging between £500 - £2,000 to devise and deliver a digital activity to continue to entertain our audiences during the lockdowns. This also provided some income for writers who had seen most of their income disappear due to the closure of schools and public events, with no certainty of when their work would return. Many of these digital projects addressed issues relating to health and well-being and we were pleased to be able to partner with the Royal College of Psychiatry in Wales on many of them, using the healing power of literature to bring people together in the virtual world and to share stories and experiences.

However, data poverty and poor digital accessibility remain a concern as literary activities continue to take place on digital platforms. As an organisation our work to widen the reach of literature and break down the barriers to participation has continued and is our key focus. We have consulted with various writers and communities from under-represented backgrounds as we developed the new flagship Representing Wales: Developing Writers of Colour programme. Consultation for the second round is currently underway, with a focus on writers from low-income backgrounds. COVID-19 has highlighted historic and structural inequalities even further, and globally significant movements such as #WeShallNotBeRemoved and Black Lives Matter have had far-reaching impact. We cannot resume our

practices and ways of working from before, and radical change and action is required by the arts sector in a meaningful and long-term way.

Ensuring full accessibility for people with disabilities is vitally important and digital platforms need to be developed and adapted to be inclusive and available to all. Organisations have a huge responsibility to ensure the safety of users and content providers and this poses new challenges and need for learning and sharing of best practice. Safeguarding audiences also remains a key concern.

Radical thinking and action will be needed across the sector for the short and medium term, and this needs to underpin any recovery strategy for the arts. By using our long-standing traditions of storytelling, performance, and community creation, we can facilitate a programme of debates, conversations, and mass engagement in radical thinking – placing the ownership and the power of planning in the hands of our people and communities. This will drive forward a diverse and coteremporary cultural sector in Wales. A process of continuous change and renewal based on reflection, questioning, listening and debate will enable a more open and democratic society to emerge. Cultural leaders and radical thinkers will be in the same room as civic planners, health experts and environmental activists – each bringing their own creativity, innovation, and imagination into problem-solving and planning a better future for Wales.

What issues should the committee prioritise in planning our work programme for the immediate and longer term?

The Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds more than others in Wales. The death of George Floyd and the global Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted the urgency of addressing systematic and structural racism across all our sectors. This particular period of reflection, listening and reading has led us as an organisation to acknowledge that more needs to be done to ensure that our literary culture is representative of the whole of Wales. To face the current challenges as a wider sector we must be ready to embrace more radical changes. We have launched a new flagship programme, dedicated to platforming writers of colour. Representing Wales: Developing Writers of Colour was planned and researched in consultation and partnership with individuals and communities with lived experience, and the ensuing programme was co-created by the cohort of writers who were selected ensuring that the opportunities offered were tailor-made for each writer's ambitions and developmental needs in terms of professional and creative support.

Culture has a key role to play in the recovery and reopening of society, as well as in addressing Covid-19 related trauma and grieving. Many clinical studies already exist which evidence the power of literature to improve the well-being and mental health of individuals. As stated above, taking part in creative writing and reading has been clinically proven to be beneficial to our well-being, both physical and mental. Now more than ever, literature should be deployed to treat a surge in long-term mental and physical illness, and the personal trauma and grief experienced by so many due to the pandemic. Literature is a powerful and economical tool to positively address some of these issues and it can contribute to improving the lives of people in Wales. It can also help to build more resilient workforces and communities and be utilised alongside other preventative measures to mitigate against ill health.

The physical distancing and lockdown measures required by the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly and profoundly affected the ways people were able to engage with one another. These changes intensified already high levels of social isolation and loneliness for many in the UK. Increased loneliness in turn impacts on mental health and well-being, leading to extra pressure on the health sector and on the economy, making it a significant challenge of Covid recovery.

Previous systems and procedures did not address satisfactorily the needs of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, disabled people, people from low-income backgrounds and other marginalised and underrepresented people and communities. A significant shift in funding is needed to develop and deliver arts in a distanced world in such a way as to make a real difference to those previously and currently left behind or left out. However, funding for the arts should not just be maintained and (ideally) increased, it should also support those organisations and artists who are doing things differently.

As a priority, we should look at the climate emergency, and use the power of the arts, specifically literature, can help increase awareness and knowledge and evoke change. Literature Wales has identified the climate emergency as a key priority for our next strategic plan (2022-2025), where we aim to increase knowledge of the climate emergency and inspire change by using creativity to educate, explore and challenge. We acknowledge and recognise the climate emergency and its devastating impact on our world and the lives of people, with the poorest hardest hit. We want to act where we can to mitigate against further escalation of the crisis and raise awareness through our work. We cannot align our work with the Well-being of Future Generations Act without recognising the destruction of our environment and climate emergency in everything we do. We will work with partners and our audiences to aim towards a greener, fairer and more prosperous Wales.

Artists, arts organisations, audiences and creative industries professionals are often radical thinkers who can offer new, innovative approaches to tackle big societal questions, including on business regeneration, education, and with particular sensitivity to diversity and inclusion. The sector as a whole need to work collectively, along with our funders, to develop a vision and action plan on how to harness this potential.

How does Brexit and the new UK-EU relationship affect you or your organisation? What support have you received to respond to the changes? What further support, if any, is needed from Welsh and UK Governments?

As a strategic and developmental body, as opposed to a performance or touring one, the new UK-EU relationship has not directly affected Literature Wales' ability to deliver our programmes and partnerships. However, we are mindful and highly aware of its effects on the communities and writers that we work with. These effects are likely to become even more apparent as the country recovers from the pandemic.

We are working hard to maintain positive relationships with our international partners and striving to continue the sense of a global Wales and the benefits of digital engagement as opposed to international travel, in line with our Environmental Plan. We have developed strong partnership with literary organisations in Scotland, Ireland and Germany – particularly during the UNESCO Year of

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Indigenous Languages – and have built opportunities to collaborate and showcase Wales’ diverse and multilingual literary culture with new audiences.

It is highly unlikely that these issues will disappear imminently, and therefore as a sector we need to find a way to turn these restrictions into opportunities – opportunities to take Wales to the world, a Wales that’s connected and a Wales that flourishes. Any additional support and promotion from both Welsh and UK Governments, as well as their delegated arts and culture organisations, would be highly welcomed in order for us to continue to platform and promote our unique heritage and diverse contemporary culture.