

CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

INQUIRY ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SCOTLAND'S CULTURE AND TOURISM SECTORS

SUBMISSION FROM Literature Alliance Scotland

Introduction

Literature Alliance Scotland (LAS) is a membership organisation committed to advancing the interests of Scotland's literature and languages at home and abroad. As Scotland's largest literary network, we bring together writers, publishers, educators, librarians, literature organisations and national cultural bodies, to create a strong, trusted collective voice for literature and languages, which are celebrated locally, nationally and internationally.

We surveyed our 31 members to understand the impact of the pandemic in March and May 2020 and this submission is based on their responses.

Impact of Covid-19

We welcome the flexible support of Creative Scotland who confirmed that current funding would not be dependent on previously agreed deliverables, encouraged the payment of freelancers and artists for cancelled events and were quick to launch the Bridging Bursary (Arts & Creative) Fund with its simple application process, which has had positive anecdotal feedback from writers.

Our May survey, completed by 84% of our membership, found that:

- 92% have cancelled or postponed events; 38% have seen promotional partnerships cancelled or postponed; 35% said they were financially exposed due to closing venues and/or shops; 35% said they'd lost audiences and 35% said financial investment had been needed to establish or increase online content. 15% were unable to continue paying freelancers
- 46% of respondents are continuing to operate digitally; while a further 38% are working at reduced levels of activity due to cancelled or paused live programmes and/or closed venues, and with staff working fewer hours to juggle work and childcare and home schooling commitments; 12% had temporarily paused operations
- 42% of members polled said their financial reserves could only sustain them until November 2020.

The cancellation of events and closure of organisations and especially bookshops, libraries and venues have had a significant impact on freelancers and writers who rely on income from, for example, teaching classes, running events and literary workshops. Although many of our members have made the move to digital to serve their audiences and have provided alternative work opportunities for some freelancers, the loss of income is still substantial, especially as many freelancers

already live hand-to-mouth and are often waiting for payment for work completed months ago.

Support measures

Our survey found that:

- The charitable status of 69% of member organisations' polled as well as the way they are funded made them ineligible for many of the UK and Scottish Government support measures
- Of the 26 respondents, only 23% of members polled had successfully applied to furlough staff with 42% of respondents not eligible for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- 38% of respondents said the Scottish Government's support measures 'somewhat' mitigated the impact of the outbreak on their organisation while 27% said 'not at all'.

People with portfolio careers have been overlooked

Freelancers form the backbone of the literature, languages and publishing sector and most have portfolio careers, juggling a mix of roles and jobs, for example, writing, reviewing, delivering workshops and short-term, part-time contracts with organisations for their livelihoods. None of these areas individually qualify them to apply for support so freelancers fall through the cracks as most support measures are assessed on an artform by artform basis rather than taking a broader view for this specific group.

Testimonial 1: "Like many writers, I have a portfolio of jobs not one specific income stream. Navigating support funds is a struggle and it's confusing to find what's available and figuring out what you're entitled to. I'm unsure where to go to ask for support. I have a part-time 'day job' two days a week on a youth project so knowing that I have a guaranteed wage coming in every month takes a little bit of the pressure off, however, I'm not entitled to government money as I have made £58 too much. This is frustrating as a lot of people with portfolio careers are in the same position. I usually top up my wage with my freelance and writing work, a lot of which includes delivering workshops with young people, and obviously a lot of that isn't going ahead now. I'm also finding that it's harder to get paid for work I've already done - understandably, as a lot of people are working from home or focused on keeping things ticking along, and not necessarily on paying people in an orderly way, but it is quite stressful."

Testimonial 2: "I exist on a mixture of freelancing and contract work. I've already been made aware of temporary, indefinite embargoes on new hires. Greater competition for grant funding will narrow opportunities of that kind too. Financial survival, even before Coronavirus, was challenging."

Recovery and renewal

The foremost concern of members for the literary ecosystem is financial survival in the coming months and years. The sector is intricately connected with organisations, businesses such as publishers and bookshops, staff, freelancers, writers and artists all interacting with one another to sustain their livelihoods.

In light of this, we need strategic investment in a sector-specific fund that is fit for purpose.

We also need financial assistance schemes to help self-employed writers and freelancers with portfolio careers who have fallen through the gaps of the current support measures.

When asked about the prospects of members' organisations to recover financially from the outbreak 38% of members polled felt 'neutral'; 31% felt 'positive', conveying an attitude of being 'hopeful but unsure'; 23% felt 'negative' and 9% 'very negative'. It is clear that the impact of a potential second wave of the virus with a subsequent lockdown in the Autumn would devastate the sector.

Clarity is urgently needed on what support will be available for recovery planning and renewing the industry against a backdrop of organisations with depleted reserves in an environment of looming economic depression, and an even more competitive market for all types of funding and fundraising.

Recovery support is also needed to help make buildings and venues safe for staff, writers, artists and audiences, not to mention support in dealing with the health and wellbeing of staff, writers and freelancers as they are prepared to return to the workplace.

We would also like to see:

- A digital development fund to improve digital access for organisations and festivals, including training.
- Commitment to current levels of funding to provide an element of security as soon as possible
- A plan for boosting creative work
- Early warnings about budgets to allow for the best planning possible
- Funding to help adapt spaces to be safe for staff and freelancers, writers, artists and audiences with clear guidelines around public access to buildings and access to PPE and sanitation kits for those who need it.
- Support and guidance for dealing with the mental health and wellbeing of staff, members, freelance artists and writers and audiences.