

FIO EVIDENCE: COVID-19 IMPACT

WHO WE ARE / WHAT WE DO

Fio in Latin means to belong, to create, to grow.

We are a theatre company and arts charity. From our base in Cardiff, we work across the UK and internationally to make interesting, political and provocative work that brings about change to deliver social justice.

We are now established as a successful young, dynamic theatre company and registered charity with a dedicated team of artists, theatre-makers, directors and supporters, all committed to finding, telling and amplifying the unheard voices and untold stories of those most in need. Fio is a project-funded, non-Arts Portfolio Wales theatre organisation and the only BAME led theatre company in Wales.

Our work addresses the consequences of the societal problems famously described as “the hidden injuries” of class by the sociologist Richard Sennett. These injuries often flow from inequality imposed and absorbed from childhood and their durability is exacerbated when different forms of inequality are layered. We are working to address these problems by building respect across difference and inequality. We will provide new opportunities for people to speak, raise self-esteem in marginalised communities, build and diversify the talent base and ensure that audiences have a chance to experience a wider range of work.

For us at Fio, social justice is about using theatre to facilitate:-

- New voices – we are committed to increasing the number and range of voices in contemporary drama
- Mutual awareness – we are building opportunities for different voices and establishing spaces for developing and sharing stories
- Organisation of voice and networks for this – we will collaborate with like-minded people across local, regional, national and international boundaries
- Listening and sharing – we will strive to reach different audiences so they can see and hear new and different stories

Our **core aims** are to:

1. combat stereotypes, challenge injustices and amplify unheard voices through bold, politically charged theatre that provokes conversations within our communities;
2. empower individuals by giving them the tools and the platforms to speak out and tell their own stories; and
3. develop a more diverse cultural landscape where theatre and the arts are for everyone

Our **strategic objectives** are to:

1. run projects with under-represented groups, inspiring them to engage with theatre and ensuring that audiences become more representative;
2. train the next generation of actors and theatre-makers, diversifying talent on and off stage; and

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3. develop and produce dynamic and provocative professional shows, which bring global political questions to local audiences.

Our productions and projects tour venues, festivals, prisons and community spaces across Wales and the UK, interrogating contested themes such as race, identity and citizenship within the context of the broader political landscape. Our projects with young people and vulnerable groups deliver skills development within communities, explore the impact of technology, and engage directly on societal issues.

We also accelerate sector-specific workforce development and diversification by offering a range of trainee roles on all of our productions and projects, bespoke participatory arts training and artist development opportunities.

Fio is an established and pioneering voice in Welsh theatre; a voice that resonates locally and reaches beyond Wales to embrace work taking place on a larger stage and across the UK and internationally.

We have done this through:-

- Extending and enhancing our creative programme
- Providing new opportunities for creative practitioners from marginalised groups, including BAME communities
- Laying deeper roots in Splott (11th most deprived ward in Wales) so we can extend the quality, range and amount of creative opportunities available in our locality
- Developing provision for hard to reach communities
- Extending our provision for young people
- Building new partnerships and collaborations
- Fostering and extending international links
- Having a diverse staff team and board of trustees
- Implementing a clear communications plan to increase our reach and raising our profile
- Pioneering a robust evidence-based approach to monitoring and evaluation

The company places and champions integration of the professional / participation elements of the company, whilst providing training opportunities and entry points for diverse emerging talent into the sector. The importance of long term sustained community engagement and co-creation of the art that happens at the highest level is our organisations fundamental core principals.

We are currently working with a range of partners and stakeholders including institutions such Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Bad Wolf productions, Wales Millennium Centre, Welsh Government, Cardiff Council, Race Council Cymru and other sectorial and educational partners. Equally the company works in equal and equitable partnerships with local grassroots organisations such as Women Connect First, BAWSO and Oasis.

The company has since in the previous 2 year (2017-2019), worked with over 10000+ people (young and old), has provided paid work to 192 freelance arts practitioners, with a 153 being of BAME background. We have provided 100s of workshops, performances and events, whilst providing 125 training opportunities. Engaging 1500+ in regular workshops.

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The company is led by the founding Artistic Director, Abdul Shayek, who is a 1st generation emigrant of Bangladeshi heritage. He is former Associate Director at the National Theatre Wales and has works across Opera, theatre and screen.

The company has operated and delivered this work on an average overall operating budget of £160,000 over the past 2 financial years. **I would like to emphasise that I know of many companies that have similar profiles to ours who are wholly engaged in firefighting and / or looking after the communities that they engage with on the meagre time and resources that they have (if any). I hope it is clear to your committee that this letter stands for many, many others who may not have the capacity or access to engage government in conversations around their own needs, or make a case for the social benefit they provide—precisely because their needs are so great and/or they are turning their attention towards looking after those who are even more vulnerable at this time.**

THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF COVID ON US, AND ON ORGANISATIONS LIKE OURS

We have thus far been in receipt of £5500 of COVID19 emergency support and this was not from Arts Council Wales, but rather a smaller trust. This has been a conscience decision in order not to stymie but rather enable others who need the current emergency support more than us, access to it. We are in the fortunate position of having secured some funding which was repurposed during this crucial period to help us survive in the short term, however in the medium to long term we will our future is very much in doubt unless further support can be found. There are a vast number of organisations which are in a similar position.

HOW EFFECTIVELY HAS SUPPORT SO FAR ADDRESSED THE SECTOR'S NEEDS?

From my perspective an influx of money provided a 6-month band-aid that missed out some big areas, and left many freelancers behind, but “band-aided” companies enough to delay the cliff-edge for a short while. What has been missed out (and what is critically needed now) is that the sector leaders did not step up to use the temporary support system in a way that best facilitated cross-sector conversation and working, so people are trying to solve their problems on their own, around their own campfires and in their own industry silos. I think if more money is handed out it needs to be acknowledged that this is an exceptional circumstance where all voices are needed, and that it is critical that we invest in time to sit together and gather evidence and put together and united and ethical case to government for support. I was not surprised to learn that ethnically diverse artists are underrepresented in this call for evidence because—as I hope I've clearly exemplified—these are the artists who have the least capacity to articulate their case, and the least direct access to the high-level conversations which highlight the need to make this case, and the least access to information about the ways in which this case will be used in lobbying government. There needs to be a fee attached to the hard work of investigating the impact of Covid on this sector, and ACW, ACE, Welsh Government and DCMS need to invest first in actively seeking out a truly representative task force (not just a “token rainbow” but a task force made up of participatory artists, freelance artists, small companies, buildings, the range) and this task force must be remunerated to carry out its work of gathering evidence, otherwise **the exact same inequalities that already are entrenched in our industry will be replicated as we create a map out of this crisis, with those people who have access to government and the immediate capacity to engage most fully with the**

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conversation doing so, so that the resulting asks to Government will be skewed in their favour and in the favour of organisations that most resemble them.

WHAT WILL THE LIKELY LONG-TERM IMPACTS OF COVID-19 BE ON THE SECTOR, AND WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED TO DEAL WITH THOSE?

This feels like a question that sits in the hands of treasury, and the critical thing will be getting a strong picture of cause-and-effect, understanding how this ship runs and how to best support it. I will say one thing, which you might not have heard much so I'll try to be very clear: I do not worry about the individuals in this sector. I do not worry about freelance artists, who their whole careers have probably had non-arts or tangentially-arts side hustles just to keep being able to do what they love. I do not worry about community engagement practitioners whose hearts will always lead them back to the communities who most need them. I do not worry about West End producers, who will thrill in dusting off their little black book of contacts to see what new projects can be dreamed up in the dust of old ones. I do not worry because all of us are defined by our skills in—and our love for—creating something out of nothing. I do not worry about art surviving.

But.

I DO worry for this industry. I worry for its duplicitousness, for its inability to transparently identify and separate its commercial and public-service arms, and get them working together in a truly collaborative way. I worry about the creative-over-participatory building hierarchies that lead to out-of-touch creative leaders and tick-box engagement strategies which have meant that philanthropic work is never properly resourced, and no one powerful enough cares about investigating, measuring, and articulating its true value and impact, especially to other industries and sectors where it could actually open up valuable opportunities and resource. I worry about the structures that have funnelled predominantly commercially-minded theatre sector leaders into the highest levels of the conversation with government, crippling DCMS, Welsh Government, ACE and ACW's ability to argue for its own public benefit with any kind of integrity, at the exact time when a focus on our public benefit might be the only thing that can get us through this strange period of time when people can't pay large sums of money to sit in rooms together en masse.

And I worry that if DCMS, Welsh Government, ACE and ACW gloss over this enormous elephant in the room—the fact that the most socially engaged artists delivering work providing the most public benefit are currently doing this (like they always have) on meagre scraps of time and money, at the exact same time that massive buildings are sitting empty and their leaders are lobbying government for enormous bailouts to cover box office losses on the basis of their “public benefit”—I worry that our confused messaging and internal hypocrisies will make our festering wounds sting harder, and will make our collective voice waver, and as a sector we will waste this valuable opportunity to heal and collaborate and integrate, and to truly lift up and evidence all of the things that this sector does that aren't just loads of people sitting in a room to watch a play.

WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNT FROM HOW DCMS, ARMS-LENGTH BODIES AND THE SECTOR HAVE DEALT WITH COVID-19?

Work harder to flatten hierarchies and dedicate resource—as in, invest serious time and money—into getting the right people into the important meetings, and in skilling them up to communicate their perspective to

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Government clearly. Not because it's the "ethical" or "right" thing to do, but because you need each other. I can't believe that isn't totally 100% crystal clear by now.

HOW MIGHT THE SECTOR EVOLVE AFTER COVID-19, AND HOW CAN DCMS SUPPORT SUCH INNOVATION TO DEAL WITH FUTURE CHALLENGES?

We and other companies like us are acutely aware that we will be enormously affected by DCMS, Welsh Government, ACE and ACWs decisions around whether or not they will use their limited public monies to bail out buildings and other organisations whose financial models (built around ticket sales and mass congregation) will be unviable and fundamentally a drain on resources until there is a vaccine, or if they will choose to place this resource in the hands of artists whose financial models and working methods have always been based in philanthropy and has emphasised social benefit through the intimate, grassroots community engagement that will be deliverable in the immediate-term. We feel like our future and our ability to continue to carry out the socially engaged arts practice that we are so passionate about sits entirely in the hands of sector leaders, and their willingness to hand over the keys at a time when our skills are the ones that are best fit to the given circumstances of the moment, and most needed by our society as it struggles to recover from this crisis. This period could be marked by greater collaboration, clarity, and integrity around community co-creation and "public art" than any other period that precedes it. But it could also fall into historic duplicitousness, hypocrisies, divisions, and confusions of core values and identity, and lead to old painful systems of communities and community-focused artists being "pimped" for their social benefit and drip-fed meagre fees to deliver the bulk of the philanthropic work. Individuals are not in crisis, certainly not individuals like us, we have always lived with instability and we know now more than ever what we stand for and why we need to keep doing the work that we do. It's the sector itself that is in crisis. And the way that you as a committee take time to understand the underlying problems and come clean about the structures that were already broken long before Covid, the more of a chance we all have at building this sector back with some kind of integrity.