

Senedd Cymru / Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, y Gymraeg a Chyfathrebu / Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee
Ymchwiliad i'r achosion o COVID-19 ac effaith y feirws ar ddiwylliant, y diwydiannau creadigol, treftadaeth,
cyfathrebu a chwaraeon / Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries,
heritage, communications and sport

CWLC COV54

Ymateb gan Hijinx / Response from Hijinx



Response: Inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on culture, creative industries, heritage, communications, and sport

What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

Overnight our world stopped, but from that trauma (and we do not use that word lightly) green shoots are beginning to form. For many organisations, the switch to digital was abrupt, but essential, particularly for those of us who serve dispersed, vulnerable communities through our work.

At Hijinx we immediately lost touring work, both in the UK and Europe, and the related income for freelancers and the company. We had to stop R&D on new productions (x3) and close all our training and community work, moving over 100 learning disabled and/or autistic actors and participants onto new online platforms, in a safe and supported manner. The team have had to work in an agile manner to support our participants, and to provide consistency and engagement – working closely with social services and other partners.

In the sector we have observed venues on the brink, freelancers left unsupported and a real risk that disabled people, and those already on the margins will be further distanced as we move into the next phase. With things moving at such a pace, people are being forgotten and we are at risk of excluding huge sections of society and their link to the arts.

How effectively has the support provided by the Welsh Government, the UK Government and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

The needs of the sector have been responded to reasonably well. It was slow to begin with which led to uneasiness in the sector. Fund and support from ACW for those organisations and individuals most at risk have been straight-forward and had a quick turnaround.

Much of the broader emergency funds for businesses and freelancers have not been accessible for many in the sector – and serious financial risks remain – we are seeing that the support in place is simply not enough to keep some going, with daily messages coming through about organisations having to lay off staff, or call in the administrators.

Freelancers have fallen through the gaps of the self-employed furlough scheme because many have diverse forms of income, including PAYE. Freelancers are key to this sector and loss of work, income, contact has left them in a very vulnerable position. They have been hardest hit at least in the short term.

The crisis has also called for a re-defining of 'resilient'. For years, many organisations like ourselves have worked to become very resilient in the eyes of funders, diversifying our income and finding new revenue streams to reduce our dependency on ACW fund. It is ironic that during the biggest crisis we have ever experienced it is those previously defined 'resilient' organisations who are suffering most, as their diverse income streams have disappeared. Organisations who, through hard work and good management, have built up reserves, find themselves ineligible for support, and not being able to apply for emergency funds. What support will be left for our resilient organisations, when they run out of their reserves, will all that hard work be wasted, when the emergency support is spent in 6-12 months' time?

What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

If theatres remain closed beyond the end of the furlough scheme in October there will be mass closures of venues across Wales. This will be compounded by venues not able to hold their Christmas shows which are a vital income source for the entire year.

As a producing touring theatre company, we face the very real possibility of having no venues in which to tour or work when we do eventually come out of this. The only way to help prevent this will be a continuation of the furlough scheme for the cultural sector until venues are able to reopen, and substantial support packages to supplement loss of earnings through Christmas productions.

Further, there is concern about how we safely make work, how that is funded when emergency funding has, understandably, diverted project income, probably for the whole year. Support to keep the sector creating safely would enable us to come back strongly when the creative spaces and public are ready.

Touring remains a mid/long term concern. Already feeling the potential impacts of Brexit, issues around quarantine and safety influence our ability to take work overseas, a key income stream, and important means of cultural exchange – even more important for a post-Brexit Wales. Clarity around plans and processes would enable us to plan more effectively and keep our people safe.

As we move out of the initial panic phase, what we need is a roadmap for recovery; clarity on future funding - are any organisations in Wales really going to be in a suitable place for a postponed ACW Investment Review next spring? A shared plan for the re-opening of the arts, guidance around how to work safely, with all members of society fully considered.

What lessons can be learnt from how the Welsh Government, the UK Government, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

There could have been more reassuring leadership early on. An immediate statement signalling the intention to support the sector would have helped to allay fears and help organisations to plan. The realisation of a plan for the rest of 20-21 would equally be highly valuable to help forecast and plan our next phases of work.

More certainty around funding and support as we move into the autumn and next year would be hugely beneficial and reassuring; it is currently incredibly difficult to plan as there are no fixed points in terms of venue opening, legislation changes, funding streams – all the while we are spending valuable money, without being able to focus it strategically in the knowledge of what might be on the horizon.

How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can the Welsh Government support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

We have all had to learn very quickly to harness digital technology to deliver our work. We would like to amalgamate this learning in our future work, combining both online with physical learning, but in order to establish the appropriate infrastructure and equipment, investment will be required, e.g. to install digital streaming kit in our venues, so that those who continue to shelter can still engage with our work.

It is well-known that Wales' digital infrastructure is not as good as it needs to be, and we are experiencing daily the frustrations and challenges of those without adequate connections, skills, or equipment to allow them to engage fully. We would welcome the opportunity for the arts to be a real partner in a future digital Wales, and this process has provided fertile ground for learning, testing and development.

As a team we have adapted well to homeworking remaining productive and motivated. The future for us is very likely to include a combination of homeworking alongside office contact. We are keen to find this new way of working for the benefit of the environment also, reducing commuting and travel time and protected work-life balance. However, it is not appropriate for all our staff due to their home environment. If there could be a fund to accommodate practical changes to people's homes to facilitate more home-working, then this could help make this a sustainable change for smaller organisations.

The sector will continue to need to evolve and adapt to the work we are emerging into, fundraising will be more competitive and challenging, new partnerships will need to be forms and new ways of creating work, at least in the mid-term, to be able to engage with audiences safely. Our traditional means to drive diverse income will be more challenging in the recession that will follow Covid, to survive organisations are going to have to find new ways to fund work, and community engagement. And we must ensure that the new landscape is one that does not exclude, that the venues and ways of presentation are accessible to all, that we don't latch on to the first digital solution, which may not be welcoming for d/Deaf or disabled people, and that we build a new eco-system that does not exclude on the basis of any protected characteristic.

It will take a real team-effort across the sector to drive confidence in audiences to return – research suggesting that audiences are not ready to come back yet at a level that would enable us to present work. How might we as a sector work together to offer reassurance, and sanctuary for audiences in these challenging times.

Sarah Horner, Chief Executive
Ben Pettitt-Wade, Artistic Director

About Hijinx

Hijinx is one of Europe's leading inclusive theatre companies, striving for equality by making outstanding art with learning disabled and/or autistic actors on stage, on screen, on the street, in the workplace, locally, nationally and internationally for Wales and for the world.

The company's acclaimed theatre work is original, surprising, edgy, and funny and is in huge demand across the globe, with productions including *Meet Fred*, *The Flop* and *Into the Light* travelling to over 20 countries in recent years.

Around Wales Hijinx Academies provide professional drama training for 70 uniquely talented actors. These Hijinx Actors, who have conditions such as Down's Syndrome, Autism and Asperger's Syndrome, are at the heart of the company's work in productions, in businesses and in community projects. They are promoted to the wider theatre, TV and film industries on www.hijinxactors.co.uk, the UK's largest casting platform dedicated to actors with learning disabilities and/or autism.

Hijinx's aim to see more actors with learning disabilities and/or autism on TV and film, as well as on stage. Hijinx Films produces stunning short films to raise the profile and impact of the unique talents of Hijinx actors, and in 2018, the company published recommendations for new screen industry standards for casting learning-disabled (neurodivergent) actors.

Hijinx Pawb offers a Wales-wide network of community drama courses for everyone who wants to act, regardless of ability or experience.

Alongside, Hijinx offers an award-winning, specialist training programme, which empowers staff in a wide range of businesses with the confidence and skills to communicate well with vulnerable customers.

Hijinx is generously supported by the Arts Council of Wales, The *Esmée Fairbairn* Foundation, Lloyds Bank Foundation and BBC Children in Need.