

**CULTURE, TOURISM, EUROPE AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

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

**SUBMISSION FROM [PLAYWRIGHTS' STUDIO, SCOTLAND AND THE SCOTTISH SOCIETY OF PLAYWRIGHTS]**

This submission should be read in conjunction with the previous submission (CTEEA/S5/20/C19/) made by the two organisations in response to the original call-out in April 2020.

**Playwrights' Studio, Scotland** is the nation's only arts organisation exclusively dedicated to the long-term support, development and promotion of Scotland's playwrights. We work actively and creatively with playwrights, connecting them with audiences and organisations, for the ultimate enrichment and enjoyment of the people of Scotland and beyond. We engage with playwrights at all stages of their careers – from members of the public writing for pleasure or wellbeing – to Scotland's most experienced professionals.

**The Scottish Society of Playwrights (SSP)** is a membership organisation representing the interests of professional playwrights in Scotland. The SSP is a collective voice to champion new writing in Scottish theatre. We advocate for the strategic support and development of new work. Founded in 1973, we are proud to have Liz Lochhead as our Honorary President. We are affiliated with the Scottish Trades Union Congress.

In preparing this submission, we contacted the playwrights who originally contributed to the Inquiry and asked them to respond to any changes.

From the responses we received, the main update to the Committee is that the areas of challenge have not changed but have been significantly exacerbated by the length of lockdown and the various restrictions due to COVID 19.

To quote one of the respondents, "the difference now is the knock-on effect, or compounding, of a terrible-but-temporary change of circumstances becoming more permanent."

In summary, the main challenges that have been brought to our attention are, the impact on:

- Individual financial circumstances
- Parents and Carers
- The wider theatre infrastructure
- Physical and mental health and wellbeing

These challenges are obviously interlinked.

### **Individual financial circumstances**

Many playwrights continue to face extreme financial hardship. Exclusion from the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) has continued for the last ten months, with little indication that this situation will change. Many are barely surviving on Universal Credit (UC) which is not sufficient to cover basic outgoings. We heard about ongoing complexity and uncertainty in securing simple support, including in well publicised areas like free school meals. Playwrights are coming to the end of any savings they might have had and are incurring debts which will be difficult to pay off. Payment or funding for creative projects is still difficult to access for a large number of playwrights, with supplementary employment in hospitality, education and care also not possible due to lockdown.

“I had anticipated that the government would, in time, have made some allowances for self-employed people who are not eligible for SEISS or furlough payments. I didn't expect where we have arrived in that there is has been no provision aside from a £20 uplift in UC payments. I am concerned that charitable support has been exhausted and there is still no government support for those ineligible for SEISS.”

### **Parents and Carers**

“If you're home schooling it's not the sort of 'have-a-go' approach of last year, you're teaching the curriculum now.”

With nurseries and schools closed, significant home schooling responsibility has fallen to parents and carers. As freelancers not on furlough or not receiving SEISS, playwrights cannot undertake work, seek work or tackle debt when home schooling.

### **The wider theatre infrastructure**

Playwrights are a fundamental part of the theatre infrastructure in Scotland and are deeply committed to playing a part in the recovery of the sector. They also continue to initiate their own projects.

Support for organisations through the Performing Arts Events Venues Relief Fund and others has been welcome, essential and has saved organisations from insolvency, and some from making large-scale redundancies. Freelance artists have also benefited. However, the purpose of the Fund was ambitious and could not possibly assist every playwright or freelance artist in Scotland whose livelihood was detrimentally affected by the pandemic. This is something Playwrights' Studio discussed with both Creative Scotland and the Scottish Government.

Whilst understanding and fully appreciating the extraordinary pressure that organisations are under and how hard they were working to secure the survival of

the sector, there were concerns expressed about the lack of transparency about the ways in which the Fund had reached freelancers.

Demand for available creative opportunities, e.g. commissions, micro-commissions, projects etc., has increased, with many playwrights still losing out on the chance to work, despite the best efforts of organisations to demonstrate openness and accessibility. Reduced capacity in organisations has had repercussions on timescales with short and sometimes impossibly impractical deadlines being set.

Hardship funds were acknowledged to have been a lifeline. However, several playwrights told us that they had been forced into a career change.

“Theatre work continues to be almost completely non-existent, and playwrights who don’t work in other media have been particularly badly affected. This does not only have a financial impact, considerable though that is: the effect on emotional and psychological health for creative artists, whose identity is very much bound up in producing their work, is very significant indeed. The consequences, in terms of artists (both experienced and emerging) being forced to abandon their careers, will be devastating for the future of the creative sector in Scotland.”

Several brought up the ramifications of Brexit and how it would affect the performing arts, even in recovery and beyond.

### **Physical and mental health and wellbeing**

“The last few months have seen valiant efforts on the part of theatre companies to produce plays and show them virtually and I applaud this attempt to keep something of the spirit of theatre alive, but no one imagined we would be back to lockdown and that public spaces would still be closed. It is hard to maintain let alone foster new energy.”

It has been a sad and demoralising time for the performing arts as one of the industries which has continued to be, “first out - last back in.” Many playwrights expressed concerns, as above, about the longer-term consequences on the wellbeing of individuals and of the sector. Some, due to a combination of the pressures outlined in this submission, are finding it impossible to write and complete work and are experiencing significant mental health challenges in the form of anxiety, burnout and depression. Serious challenges around physical recovery from COVID or other health issues was also reported.

### **Opportunities**

Several were identified by playwrights, although the word ‘opportunities’ was heavily caveated.

### **Valuing the creative sector**

“I hope the Scottish and UK government will wake up about the creative sector, which is worth £6billion in Scotland, currently vanishing down the plug hole. Its economic value alone is worth more than farming and fishing combined, yet they are haemorrhaging skills and talent, instead of laying foundations for economic recovery with some judicious investment now. And this at a time when Brexit is an enormous extra burden for the creative sector, whose leading edge is predicated on international reach and impact.”

### **New ways of working**

Digital and hybrid models of producing and presenting work are being anticipated by playwrights and many had been using this time to look at options for socially distanced work, outdoor work and other ingenious ways of creating new plays and performance reaching and involving audiences across Scotland and beyond.

Playwrights based outside the central belt of Scotland hoped that the level playing field that had been created through the use of digital meetings would continue into the future.

The climate crisis was also discussed in relation to travel but also as accelerating our urgency in seriously addressing it, “treat the climate crisis as we have this pandemic, and acknowledge we are in one, which is essentially the over-arching public health emergency (Covid a small part of it).”

### **Building back better**

“I think the sector could use this opportunity to become much more self-sustaining from a general health and mental health point of view. I don't think we can or should continue to expect freelancers to work so hard for so little and I hope this crisis will make it easier for women, parents, people of colour, people who don't have a lot of money and disabled artists to participate in the sector in a healthy and self-sustaining way.”

Many playwrights hoped that this crisis and the particular devastation experienced by the performing arts had demonstrated and evidenced the need for continued support for freelancers as well as for organisations, and not simply through organisations. Many felt that the paradigm of artists being dependent on organisations for survival needed to change and change fast.

Once again, Universal Basic Income was robustly proposed, as was immediate action on the grossly unfair situation where 3 million UK residents are currently excluded from financial support.

Fiona Sturgeon Shea, Creative Director & Chief Executive, Playwrights' Studio, Scotland

John McCann and Linda Duncan McLaughlin, Co-Chairs, Scottish Society of Playwrights