

Dafydd Elis-Thomas, MS
Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism
Via email

29th October 2020

Dear Mr Elis-Thomas,

With Welsh Government preparing new national restrictions beyond the current firebreak lockdown, we are writing with the urgent request to review the restrictions placed on our nation's theatres and arts venues and the ability to organise participatory arts activities. We fear that while funding through the Cultural Recovery Fund has given organisations vital support to stabilise their organisation, there is little to no scope for those retained staff to work.

We understand and respect the urgency of the current pandemic and the need for local and national measures to stop the spread of the virus; however, to date, we have not seen any evidence that would deem community arts activities organised in theatres as unsafe. With the pandemic exacerbating mental health challenges and increasing social isolation and loneliness, participatory arts activities are now needed more than ever. The evidence of these activities is recognised by the Arts Council of Wales through their Arts and Health work, including their [Memorandum of Understanding with the Welsh NHS Confederation](#), and their support for the Cross Party Group on Arts and Health in the Senedd.

We are would request Welsh Government, therefore, to:

- Review and update the [Health Protection \(Coronavirus Restrictions\) \(Nos. 1-3\) \(Wales\)](#) to allow theatres and performance venues to reopen so that participatory arts activities and rehearsals can take place;
- Update the guidance on [Rehearsing, performing and taking part in performing arts: guidance for a phased return](#) to allow for an increase in participation numbers and broader operating conditions for participatory arts activities;
- Share any evidence and data that would not permit Welsh Government to implement these requested changes
- Identify any areas where the sector needs to provide further insights to Welsh Government to provide the confidence and reassurance that theatres can be reopened safely.

Arts venues and theatres are home to a wide spectrum of activity including workshops, community arts, drama classes, youth theatre meetings, visual arts classes etc. Not only has the guidance been ambiguous on these gatherings with no clear guidance on numbers or space requirements, for example, but many of these activities can now not take place simply because they rely on venues like theatres to host them. Therefore, considering the Health Protection regulations not permitting theatres as buildings to open, renders most of the guidance for the reopening of the performing arts redundant.

We represent leisure and cultural trusts across the UK and in Wales our members provide professionally operated and trusted facilities. They have successfully and safely reopened leisure facilities, swimming pools, libraries, community centres and visitor centres as

restrictions have lifted. Yet they have been unable to utilise that same expertise to re-open arts venues for the benefit of thousands of users in their communities.

To date, arts activities that have re-started, for example dance schools, have done so using the *organised activities for children* or the *education services* exemptions in the absence of clear, defined arrangements for the arts. This needs to change with tailored arrangements appropriate for the nature of participatory arts activities. Even when using these exemptions, activities have been linked back to the more general guidance for indoor gatherings which before the firebreak lockdown was limited to six. This is in stark contrast with the much-welcomed sport and exercise guidance that allows operations with very specific exemptions of up to 30 people participating, provided that other physical distancing measures could be maintained. It seems incongruous that a visual arts group of up to 30, for example, would not be able to meet in an arts centre with similar safety measures in place.

Welsh Government has so far not published evidenced reasoning as to why the theatres are not permitted to open. The arts sector fully understands and accepts that certain activities cannot be allowed to take place, such as live indoor performances to an audience, but there seems no clear rationale for regulating against the buildings themselves being available for other activities. These participatory arts activities deserve the same thought and consideration as that given to other sectors. As we mentioned at the start of our letter, we must not forget about the positive health impact these activities could make, but currently many people, young and old, are precluded from activities which play a critical role in their mental and physical wellbeing.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to working with you on revising this guidance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Kirsty Cumming'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kirsty Cumming

Chief Executive Officer, Community Leisure UK

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