Impact of COVID-19 on music education (December 2020) 
Briefing by the Incorporated Society of Musicians

In December 2020 the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) published ‘The heart of the school is missing’, a ground-breaking report investigating the devastating impact of coronavirus on music teaching in schools in the UK. For more information please contact Liam Budd, Senior External Affairs & Policy Manager at Liam.Budd@ISM.org.

1. Summary

When schools teach music and other creative subjects, our whole society and economy benefits. Music education is essential to the talent pipeline of the music industry, which is worth £5.8bn a year to the UK economy.

Beyond the intrinsic value of studying music for its own sake, there is a wealth of evidence that studying music builds cultural knowledge, creative skills and improves children’s health, wellbeing and wider educational attainment.

Research by the ISM revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on all aspects of music education – curriculum entitlement, singing in schools, practical music making, extra-curricular activities, instrumental learning and examinations. The ISM urges the Learning Directorate to implement the recommendations made in this report, including urgently revisiting their singing, brass and wind guidance in light of further scientific studies, to allow all pupils to continue their instrumental learning.

2. Background

2a. What is music education

The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) applies to children aged 3 – 18 with music as part of the Expressive Arts curriculum area in the Broad General Education phase (ages 3 – 13/14).

Through classroom music, children and young people develop their skills in making and creating music through performing, composing/producing and improvising as well as responding critically and in an informed way to music from a wide range of genres and traditions.

Although classroom music forms the foundation of children and young people's music education, is not enough on its own. Most schools provide a range of extra-curricular opportunities for young people to develop their musical interests, such as school orchestras, choirs and other ensembles.

2b. The decline of music education before COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19, music education was already facing significant challenges including cuts to funding, widening gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students (particularly for instrumental tuition), and falling teacher training and recruitment numbers.

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland carried out research into music education in Scotland between 2018 and 2019 and a report by the Music Education Partnership Group (MEPG) was subsequently published in February 2019 entitled “What’s Going on Now?”.

This was a follow up to research conducted in 2003.

The report identified some perception of a devaluation of music compared to other subjects and a lack of specialist music teachers in primary schools. The numbers of primary school music teachers fell by 50 per cent from 98 in 2008 to 49 in 2019. Government figures from the October 2019 intake showed that targets for music trainees were missed by 37 per cent.
Inequalities in access to music provision were also identified with a postcode lottery for the cost of instrumental tuition. Some Local Authorities provided music tuition for free and where others charged, the fees varied widely. This widened the gap between those who could afford instrumental tuition and those who could not. The report also found that the demand for instrumental tuition in schools often outstripped the supply.

These trends, in the context of the greatly reduced delivery of music in school settings due to COVID-19, are likely to deepen.

3. Effect of COVID-19 outbreak on music education

3a: The impact on schools: ISM findings

Collated from over 1300 responses across the UK music teaching profession working in schools, the ISM’s survey findings reveal the detrimental impact that COVID-19 is having on music education. Headline figures from the report show that:

- Almost 10% of primary and secondary schools across the UK are not teaching class music at all, even though it is a requirement of the curriculum.
- 76% of primary school and 53% of secondary school teachers in Scotland stating that music provision is being reduced.
- Extra-curricular activities are no longer taking place in 91% of primary schools and 79% of secondary schools in Scotland this academic year.

Singing, practical music making, extra-curricular activities and instrumental lessons are all being negatively affected by coronavirus:

- Teachers report that face-to-face instrumental lessons are not continuing in 35% of primary schools and 28% of secondary schools.
- 86% of secondary music teachers report that they have re-written schemes of work due to coronavirus.
- 16% of secondary music teachers report that they have no access at all to specialist music classrooms and 43% of music teachers are required to move between non-specialist classrooms to teach some or all music this academic year.
- One teacher was even quoted as saying they have been given 15 B & Q buckets to use as drums in the classroom.

Music teachers’ health and well-being are being negatively impacted through the changes they are experiencing in the delivery of classroom and extra-curricular music as well as the reduced support they are receiving from their schools.

In Scotland, guidance published by the Learning Directorate on 30 July 2020 specified that singing, talking at volume and playing wind and brass instruments should be avoided ‘during the initial return to schools’. Further guidance for music teaching was published by Education Scotland on 21 September 2020 with a sliding scale of risk. This guidance advises that children and young people should not take part in singing, brass or wind activities with other people and suggests either virtual lessons or pupils making recordings of themselves and giving them to their teachers as an alternative to face-to-face lessons.
Unfortunately for most schools this came too late to implement, and we are seeing the impact of this in our survey responses. This is why on 11 August 2020, the ISM along with Music Mark and the Music Teachers’ Association launched a UK-wide campaign, #CanDoMusic, to ensure all children and young people could resume their musical learning by providing practical ideas and resources.\textsuperscript{vii}

4. Policy recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, the ISM calls for all four UK Governments to:

- Demonstrate clear leadership, through actively encouraging music teaching in schools and the wider community safely, in line with government guidance and using external resources available through #CanDoMusic.
- Provide clear, timely and consistent guidance to facilitate music teaching in schools and the wider community for the rest of the 2020/21 academic year and beyond to ensure young people’s opportunities to make and create music is not disrupted further.
- Guarantee that pupils sitting music assessments in summer 2021 are rewarded for their achievements and that none are disadvantaged by the coronavirus pandemic.

In addition, the Learning Directorate should:

- Urgently revisit their singing, brass and wind guidance in light of further scientific studies, to allow all pupils to continue their instrumental learning.

5. About the ISM

The Incorporated Society of Musicians is the UK’s oldest professional representative body for musicians, set up in 1882 to promote the art of music and to protect the interests of all those working in the music sector. The ISM has over 10,500 members right across the U.K. We are one of two subject associations for music education and have many thousands of music teachers in the membership working in every conceivable setting including the classroom and music education hubs. The ISM provides the secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education which published the acclaimed State of the Nation report last year focusing on music education.

\textsuperscript{1} https://www.ukmusic.org/research/music-by-numbers-2020/
\textsuperscript{iv} https://www.gov.scot/publications/teacher-census-supplementary-statistics/
\textsuperscript{vi} https://education.gov.scot/media/4a3d2zrb/music-guidelines-11-11-20.pdf
\textsuperscript{vii} https://www.candomusic.org/