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 Department for Education and Skills to implement the recommendations made in this report, including publishing the National Plan for Music Education without delay.

2. Background

2a. What is music education

In the 2008 Curriculum for Wales, music is part of Creative Development in the Foundation stage (3 – 7 years old) and a stand-alone subject for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 (7 – 14 years old). A new Curriculum for Wales Framework was published in January 2020 covering pupils aged 3 – 16 for implementation from September 2022. Music will become part of the Expressive Arts Area of Learning and Experience.

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, it 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), falling teacher training and recruitment numbers and a continuing decrease in the uptake of music examination courses.

The Welsh Government commissioned the ‘Music services feasibility study’, published in January 2019, to identify and assess options for the future delivery of music services. The report identified a lack of consistency in the structure and governance of music education, the fee structure of Music Education Services, the cost of provision and the sustainability of the music workforce.
The report found that in primary schools, music teaching was very much dependent on the expertise of the staff and although there were usually one or more specialist music teachers in secondary schools, there was an increasing move towards the creation of Expressive Arts departments. Schools had also seen a decline in entries for GCSE and A Level music. GCSE music entries fell 37 per cent between 2009 and 2019 and A Level music entries fell 58 per cent in the same period.iii (Figures not adjusted for cohort size).

The report concluded that a National Plan for Music Education should be considered along with the creation of a new organisation to develop and deliver the plan.

Government figures for all trainee teachers in Wales in 2018/19 show that the overall number of secondary trainees was 44 per cent lower than target figures and 22 per cent lower for primary trainees. There were just 10 trainees for secondary music in this cohort representing 2% of all secondary trainees.iv The number of registered secondary music teachers fell from 424 in 2016 to 407 in 2020.v

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 are not teaching class music at all, even though it is a requirement of the curriculum.
- 68% of primary school and 39% of secondary school teachers stating that music provision is being reduced.
- Extra-curricular activities are no longer taking place in 72% of primary schools and 66% of secondary schools 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.
The Department for Education and Skills guidance from 13 July 2020 only makes reference to peripatetic teachers, who are permitted to move between schools. No further mention of music is made in this guidance or in subsequent updates 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.

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
- Adopt a consistent approach to exams and assessments for 2021 and 2022 ensuring that core subjects are not prioritised over other subjects creating an unnecessary hierarchy.
- 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 Department for Education and Skills should:

- Commit to a National Plan for Music Education and provide a publication date

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.

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i https://www.ukmusic.org/research/music-by-numbers-2020/
vii https://www.candomusic.org/