



## **Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann**

**Written Submission**

**to**

**The Special Committee on Covid-19 Response**

**on the topic of**

**The impact of Covid-19 on the arts and entertainment sector.**

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Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, the largest Irish cultural movement, with 430 branches in 18 countries; a voluntary community based organization its structures comprises of local Branches, County/Regional Boards, Provincial Councils, its Ardchomhairle (Central Executive Council) and its Buanchoiste (Standing Committee). Comhaltas' 6 Provincial structures comprise: Connaught, Leinster, Munster and Ulster (Comhaltas has upwards on 70 Branches in Ulster) Britain and North America. Overseas Branches in Australia, Asia, Europe and South America report directly to the Ardchomhairle.

Comhaltas has provided both its primary funders, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, and the Department of Foreign Affairs - Emigrant Support Programme/Irish Abroad Unit with comprehensive status reports in relation to the financial and overall impacts of COVID-19 on the organisation's core activities and events. The impact of the suspension and cancellation of these Comhaltas events have parallel impacts on the overall cultural tourism sector, and the overall arts and entertainment sector in Ireland. Accordingly CCÉ has been invited to make a written submission to the Oireachtas Covid-19 Response.

The extent of the impact of Covid-19 on the activities and role of Comhaltas as the primary Irish cultural organization nationally and internationally is immense. As a voluntary, community-based organisation Comhaltas promotes Irish traditional music, song, dance and storytelling and the Irish language, through its structures, its public events and multifaceted educational programme, and the services provided by its 18 cultural centres.

The period of COVID-19 shutdown and phased recovery thereafter coincides with the most intensive period of activity in the Comhaltas calendar, in Ireland, Britain, North America and overseas.

Immediate outcomes of COVID-19 include:

- The cancellation of 44 Fleadhanna Ceoil throughout the island of Ireland, Britain, North America (and Féile Cheoil Tokyo), including Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann 2020.
- Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann is Ireland's largest cultural festival. Fleadh 2019 Drogheda attracted 750,000 visitors; up to 60 % of attendees are young people. The Fleadh generates up to E50m for the local economy. As with all Fleadhanna Ceoil it is not in a fixed venue, thereby resulting in a geographical spread of its benefits to the cultural tourism sector, business and society. Fáilte Ireland surveys demonstrate that between 22-27% of visitors to Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann are from overseas. Fleadh 2020 was to be taking place in Mullingar (the last Fleadh to be hosted in Mullingar being in 1963) the founding town of Comhaltas, a Fleadh that had a vision based in 'The Homecoming'.
- Whereas CCÉ is a voluntary based organization Comhaltas Fleadhanna and Festivals, and associated broadcasting productions e.g. Fleadh TV,

Fleadh Cheoil RTÉ, Raidió na Gaeltachta, etc. have increasingly provided formal performance opportunities for professional artists.

- The closure of CCÉ's 18 Cultural Centres throughout Ireland; where staff worked primarily remotely to support the voluntary sector, the centres' cultural and community activities were cancelled. While continuing to support and service community and not-for-profit activities these centres have been steadfastly working towards developing sustainable models of operation, a model that is temporarily broken due to the resulting impact of COVID-19 on the economy, and overall lack of consumer confidence and concerns around attending events and gatherings.
- These 18 centres include Dún Uladh, Comhaltas' Regional Centre in Omagh, Tyrone that in conjunction with Comhaltas Uladh has succeeded in keeping communications open between both traditions in Northern Ireland; Dún Uladh also leads CCÉ's Northern Ireland strategy. )
- Cancellation of additional Comhaltas Traditional Festivals and events, including Summer Schools and Scoil Éigse – CCÉ International Summer School which precedes Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann annually.
- Cancellation of the Annual Comhaltas Seisiún Programme consisting of over 450 Seisiún shows of traditional Irish entertainment in up to 50 venues throughout Ireland.
- Cancellation of all local Comhaltas Branch activity, including the 1,500 classes organized weekly by CCÉ.
- Cancellation of the Comhaltas SCT – Traditional Music Exams- throughout Ireland and overseas.
- Cancellation of the TTCT- Comhaltas' Traditional Music Teachers Diploma Course which attracted worldwide candidates.
- Cancellation of Comhaltas Performances and Concert Tours overseas.
- Local Branch activity creates the foundation for CCÉ's unique contribution to the informal education sector through its weekly classes and other events key to the holistic Comhaltas Education Programme. These CCÉ units, like all Comhaltas units voluntary and community based, face the challenges of all voluntary organisations in terms of volunteer lack of confidence in re-engaging with indoor gatherings indoor especially vulnerable groups. Further concerns include availability of appropriate venues into the future operational costs according to Public Health guidelines etc.

- Comhaltas units outside the island of Ireland – to include Britain, North America, Japan, Australia and South America - have also had their activities and events cancelled in line with official state directives. The COVID-19 coincided with the most intense period of activity for all CCÉ regions abroad with similar economic, social and organizational impacts as that experienced in Ireland. The scale locational diversity and distance that apply to Comhaltas units overseas e.g. North America, Australia, South America, and Asia bring further challenges. Furthermore overseas Comhaltas members and associates are not visiting Ireland, as they usually do, to attend Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann and other Comhaltas events, especially those during June-August, Comhaltas in Ireland and overseas has maintained on-going communications with its membership/ Irish networks abroad working at local level to stay connected with Irish Diaspora and community, especially those who are isolated or vulnerable.

The loss of operational income generated from activities is an immediate outcome of COVID-19, while longer-term impacts include the challenge of reactivating appropriate activity in line with Public Health guidelines; to this effect Comhaltas is fortunate to have a robust voluntary organisational structure which, with the support of its staffed 18 cultural centres had, prior to COVID-19, the capacity to provide services to 3million people annually. This multi-faceted extensive and long-established Comhaltas structure is to be benefit of CCÉ and Ireland's traditional arts and entertainment industry as it rebuilds itself and contributes to the rebooting of the economy.

The cancellation of all CCÉ events and activities led to Comhaltas members, and units throughout Ireland and worldwide utilising various online and digital platforms to ensure that the movement fulfilled its mission, as was feasible. Through the provision of virtual cultural and community activities and engagements CCÉ communicated with its members and followers, and the overall Irish traditional community worldwide. It adapted its activities while retaining the ethos of people based, person-to-person oral transmission, which is key to intangible cultural heritage and the Irish cultural traditions. Every effort was made to continuously include the Comhaltas members who rely on traditional communication methods, with targeted emails to Comhaltas officers and points of contact who then circulated news locally; physical mailshots were also optimized, as appropriate. Individual CCÉ members and units, and the general public were supported by the pro-active voluntary and cultural centres' resources which demonstrated to its user how various av/video platforms worked and tailored certain online events to older audiences. Comhaltas volunteers, at all levels, supported by Head Office and Regional Cultural Centre staff have channelled their energies and expertise towards the development, monitoring and maintenance of appropriate virtual/online engagements and will continue to optimise these as the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis continue to unfold, and during the gradual phased recovery of business and society.

However, whilst online models of delivery are likely to stay with us for the foreseeable future, monetising this digital content is extremely difficult and will not fill the income gap and building of relationships that is associated with 'live' participative events. It is understood that the participative nature of Comhaltas activities will continue to be significantly shaped by the medium and longer term Public Health guidelines and accompanying restrictions

Comhaltas members and units have a long history of contributing to local and national fundraising initiatives for charities and specific targeted frontline fundraising activities. Throughout COVID-19 this commitment remained visible.

CCÉ also made a visible contribution to national initiatives such as Creative Ireland's Cruinniú na nÓg and Ode to Joy which during 2020 were primarily virtual activities; CCÉ Branches also look forward to engagement with their local Culture Night Coordinators consolidating its annual programme of Culture Night activities.

CCÉ has maintained on-going communication with its membership and stakeholders throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically acknowledging the assistance of the DCHG and DFAT during these unprecedented times, grant assistance that has been essential to CCÉ's continued survival during this national and global crisis. The commitment of CCÉ's voluntary sector who, supported as feasible by the cultural centres, ensured that a Comhaltas presence and leadership throughout the crisis to date, supporting the availability of the Irish cultural traditions to global audiences.

Comhaltas looks forward to the restoration of its activities and events in line with Public Health guidelines and phased reopening of business and society. It will draw on its learnings, including the wealth of skills, expertise and local leadership of its committed membership that emerged, as it adapted itself at every level, to continue to realize its mission in a different and restricted world; the preservation, development and promotion of Irish traditional music, song and dance in all their forms, and the promotion of the Irish language as a living language in the appropriate community setting, throughout the island of Ireland, the Irish Diaspora and Irish culture enthusiasts worldwide .

Such resources and the resilience of Comhaltas as a movement, with the on-going support of its funding Departments – DCHG and DFAT- mean Comhaltas is well positioned to face the challenges of the future, while also focusing on the development and implementation of its forthcoming AN RÓD SEO ROMHAINN plan moving forward from 2020-2021 during which celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup> year in existence.

**ENDS**