

Statement to the

**Culture, Communications, Welsh Language,
Sport, and International Relations Committee
Senedd Cymru**

concerning the proposed

**Closure of the Royal Welsh College of Music
and Drama Junior Department**

17th June 2024

Statement on the Closure of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama Junior Department

Introduction

The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (RWCMD) has recently circulated a proposal to parents and students to close its Junior Department (Young RWCMD). Communications from the College indicate that this was due to financial constraints within the main college, which serves undergraduate and postgraduate students. The recent news has left students and staff with no alternative provisions of the same standard, and Wales with a huge gap in its music education for young people. Without immediate action, what is already the only conservatoire in Wales will also become the only conservatoire in Great Britain without a Junior Department. We ask the Culture Committee of Senedd Cymru to consider this closure and to support us in our efforts to keep open Young RWCMD, an invaluable resource for past and future generations. This statement, drafted and submitted by current Young RWCMD students, Erin Thomas and David Ingham, provides an overview of the role played by the College in nurturing musical and acting talent and in building a music culture in Wales marked by inclusivity and excellence. It offers brief testimony in an appendix from other Young RWCMD students as to the very serious damage which will be done to young people's development and opportunities by its closure.

RWCMD's Closure Proposal and its Effects

The College has proposed the closure of its junior department, which provides the highest level of specialist education in these subjects in Wales each weekend in term time. 112 staff will suffer redundancy and 426 students will immediately lose their lessons. Around 50% of these students are on bursaries, and many of them have their full fees paid. If the department closes these bursaries will no longer be accessible and it is possible accessing any music or drama tuition will become unaffordable for these students. Staff, students and parents were told on 10th May that the department was likely to be closing, leaving only seven more teaching weeks before the end of term. These students devote a whole day each week to this education; some have been attending for many years. This is a big commitment, and they care very deeply

about the contribution Young RWCMD makes to their lives. Over the past weeks parents have spoken to us of their worries for their children's wellbeing if the closure goes ahead: many are already experiencing anxiety over the proposals.

What Young RWCMD Currently Provides

The community of like-minded, talented young musicians and actors the Young RWCMD creates for children across Wales (only 34% of students on the advanced level courses are from Cardiff, some travel from Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, even from across the border in Bristol and Somerset) is irreplaceable. Alongside this community, students receive not only one to one tuition from the very highest-level teachers, but also musicianship lessons, chamber music and orchestral tuition, specialist classes in keyboard, theory, and even more on the music side alone. Drama students also get the best possible tuition. But in addition to this the provision is bilingual, and lessons and workshops are delivered by professional musicians and actors who are also able to assist in smoothing the student's transition from junior department to higher education and beyond, into the professions. Many students, thanks to the Young RWCMD's specialist tuition, are already thriving in the music world: a noticeable number of Urdd Eisteddfod winners this year are students at the Junior Conservatoire; many compete and are successful in the renowned BBC Young Musician of the Year; this year, one student has been accepted onto Juilliard's Summer Voice Programme; many students are also members of the National Orchestras and Youth Choirs of Wales and Great Britain. The Junior Departments offer priceless opportunities and experiences to students; some singers were given the opportunity to perform in masterclasses during Cardiff Singer of the World 2023, which was broadcasted globally.

Weakness of the College's Proposed Alternative

The RWCMD suggests that the National Music Service will be there to support these students who will have had their artistic education so abruptly removed, and indeed, many of the music students began their musical lives through the incredible lessons provided by the music services in schools and music centres. Nonetheless, having started from this essential service, students' ability to access full and rich musical education depends on RWCMD as the National Conservatoire. The College enables junior students to take those vital further steps

though its outstanding facilities, e.g. a purpose built concert hall and theatre, soundproofed practice rooms and world-class Steinway pianos throughout the building as well as high quality instruments to loan. The latter scheme, as well as a generous scheme for means-tested scholarships opens up these opportunities to all. As students they benefit from access to other talented students from across Wales (and parts of England) and from the most inspiring, highly qualified and experienced teaching staff. Wales's National Music Service is an extremely valuable scheme, but it cannot provide equivalent opportunities.

Funding Comparison with other UK Nations

Closure of Young RWCMD is a matter of national interest. If the College's plans are realized, Wales's national conservatoire will be the only royal conservatoire in the UK without a junior department. This would leave Welsh children in a disadvantaged position by comparison with their English and Scottish counterparts. The National Music and Dance Scheme in England offers government funded, means-tested bursaries of up to £3000 to everyone attending a junior music college and this is matched in Scotland. There is, however, no parity of funding for the junior department of the RWCMD. It currently receives no government funding. The predicted deficit for the running of the Young RWCMD across the current academic year is £200,000. Access to an equivalent bursary scheme alongside some modest remodelling and a push for slightly higher recruitment figures could make the junior departments a financially sustainable part of the RWCMD.

Currently, the RWCMD are subsidising the junior departments from their reserves, and the prevalent economic difficulties in Higher Education and beyond mean they are unable to continue to do so. It is unfair for the crisis of HE funding and recruitment to impact on the opportunities for under 18s. Wales currently sends many of its young actors and musicians to study at degree level in music and drama colleges throughout the country and internationally. The vast majority have passed through the Young RWCMD. These students are the best advertisement for Wales's world-renowned arts industry. We will lose very many of these talented young people from the professions if this closure is allowed to happen. In addition to those students who move away post 18, many remain in Wales and study at the senior department of the RWCMD. By removing the junior departments there will also be a new issue with recruitment for Wales's national conservatoire.

Student Response to the Closure Proposal

Students affected by this proposed closure have been fighting hard for the continuation of the Young RWCMD, organising numerous events – a ‘play-in’ (where students performed a concert in the foyer) and two demonstrations at the Senedd (where students and alumni played live music) – in many cases, doing so while taking their GCSE and A level exams. Students who are moving on to higher education in September have fortunately been able to capitalise on the opportunities provided by the Young RWCMD throughout their formative years, and they want future generations of Welsh children to be able to do the same. The Young RWCMD sees nearly 100% of its students moving on to higher education, all of whom go on to promote the Welsh arts in their varied places of education and future professions. It is no wonder, that at the time of writing, a Senedd petition to prevent the closure has amassed 10,485 signatures at the time of writing. With the ecosystem of Welsh arts already threatened by cuts to Welsh National Opera, we are at risk of making another huge dent to our national musical heritage and future, if the young people of Wales no longer have access to a junior department at their national conservatoire.

Erin Thomas, Young RWCMD Current Student (19 years)
David Ingham, Young RWCMD Current Student (18 years)

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