COVID-19 and challenges for the design sector

All-Party Parliamentary Group for Design and Innovation

Few sectors of the economy punch above their weight like design. According to research by the Design Council, the value of the design economy grew by 52 percent between 2009 and 2016, and is worth 73 percent of the financial services and insurance industry combined.

However, this success is rarely backed by direct support from Government. At usual economic times, this is regrettable, but the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has placed matters into stark focus.

In a recent survey conducted by the Creative Industries Federation, **over 40 percent of design and other creative organisations estimated that their income had decreased by 100 percent since the introduction of lockdown measures**. With the vast majority of design firms employing 10 people or fewer, the sector – especially freelancers - have struggled to have their voice heard by the Government.

Although the Treasury has been quick to respond to the wider economic picture, many small firms and self-employed individuals have been unable to access the government-backed funding and furlough schemes that have proven so vital to other sectors of the economy.

In a recent letter to the Chancellor from APDIG Chair, Barry Sheerman, written in consultation with members and following an online roundtable on Wednesday 15ᵗʰ April, the All-Party Design and Innovation Group (APDIG) made a number of recommendations to improve the outcomes for the sector. These included; establishing an emergency support fund to provide direct grants and loans to support struggling creative workers, developing a recuperation mechanism to reimburse artists and designers who have incurred costs during the production of cancelled projects, and a freeze on evictions from studios and galleries on the same basis as that available for commercial tenants.

The roundtable, participants highlighted how design firms had been at the forefront of schemes such as the Government's ventilator challenge – helping to develop new and low-cost medical machinery to save the lives of those suffering from the disease. Others noted how businesses, schools and universities were utilising everything from 3D printers to rapidly produce breathing valves, to high-value textile firms manufacturing everything from face-masks to mattresses for the NHS.

In the longer-term, design thinking will be a vital part of the response to the most serious public health crisis in a generation. Improving health and well-being, combating income inequality, and distributing economic growth fairly around the United Kingdom can only be achieved by comprehensive plans and radical design principles.

The need to tackle the current crisis head-on, but also to consider the cause, as well as the symptoms, of poor policy outcomes, can only come from the application of design across the whole of society.

Despite the obvious policy challenges stemming from COVID-19, the Government has since shown how it can mobilise the industrial and economic forces available to meet the challenge it poses to British society. Now, it must incorporate design theory innovation thinking as it considers the next steps.

Policy makers can achieve this by bringing design professionals into the heart of the Government reconstitution taskforces, ensuring that the Government Digital Service is reinforced as the core provider of online support for a society where social distancing will be the 'new normal' for many months to come, and – just as was the case with 1951's Festival of Britain – giving design a lead role at its successor event in 2022. Design is about much more than aesthetics – it is the process by which we solve the problems of the past, present and future.

-Jack Tindale