



Dear All

I hope all is well with you, your families and friends.

2021 has been an incredibly difficult year for each and every one of us, and we want to personally thank you all for your hard work and continued commitment to Wac Arts.

We are all part of a remarkable, pioneering Charity and Justina and I are proud to be its CEO and Chair. Our work changes lives and gives young people the chance of a better future. With inequality on the rise, Wac Arts is needed more than ever.

We want to directly address with you concerns raised publicly by the Wac Arts Concerns Group and set out what we, as a united and transparent leadership team, have done to tackle them. We also want to reassure you that any future concerns you have will be taken seriously and that you should not hesitate to raise them.

A bit of background

Since it was founded in 1974, Wac Arts has used the arts to empower generations of young people who face barriers to opportunity. For some supporters of Wac Arts, especially its founding members and those who were once its students, the Charity is a treasured family.

Like all organisations, Wac Arts has faced its struggles. 2012 was an acutely difficult year with Wac Arts losing its regular funding from both the Dance and Drama Awards (DADA) and the Arts Council. This came on top of earlier periods of declining income while costs remained persistently high.

The fact the Charity survived is testament to the dedication of its staff and supporters however, against this financial backdrop, the Charity has been unable to invest sufficiently in the modernisation of both its programme and operations for over a decade.

Allegations

In 2020, during the onset of the coronavirus global pandemic, a Group of people including the founder of Wac Arts, former leadership, employees, ex-students, patrons and some individuals not connected with the Charity, created the *Wac Arts Concerns Group*. They raised concerns about the running of the organisation both today and in previous years.

It has been essential to take their concerns seriously and we investigated each of their claims thoroughly. Given the majority of allegations pre-dated the appointment of the current Board and Senior Leadership Team, we were able to review the matters impartially.

Whilst a loss of income had certainly hindered the Charity's historic work and approach, we found that many of the accusations presented could not be substantiated with evidence – which was essential for us to tackle fairly. There was also a discord between the views reported and presented by current beneficiaries and those of the Group. External legal advice was sought to ensure we were sufficiently informed in how to address the matter in the best interest of the Charity. As a point of good order, the Charity reported the allegations to the Charities Commission. The Commission concluded on 10th November 2020 they would not be “taking any further action”. We continued to engage in best practice by informing the Commission in 2021 of developments concerning the Group. On 27th April 2021, the Commission acknowledged our report and told us they have been

assured that “trustees are dealing with the matter appropriately and responsibly” and that they “do not require further updates”.

Constructive Dialogue

In an effort to rebuild trust, we planned regular meetings with the Group. We listened to the Group to best understand concerns and perspectives. Our approach was to ensure that we did not create tokenistic policies, participate in knee jerk reactions or employ short-term fixes. Any decisions we took to change Wac Arts would be informed solely by what was in the best interest of the Charity. We also explained the need to manage our resources, balancing improvement activity with the daily needs of the Charity against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic.

Decision Making

Where we concluded more work could be done to improve the public benefit Wac Arts provides, we did not hesitate to change policies and practices – sometimes implementing the Group’s exact suggestions. These changes were communicated to the Group.

Our action plan, which we shared with the Group, included the areas of work we committed to complete in 2021. We completed actions in the timeframe we set out and shared these with the Group. We also stressed our enthusiasm and continued commitment to completing the rest of the actions throughout 2021. Our action plan includes:

- An external review of our governance
- Creation of:
 - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion working group
 - Stakeholder steering group
 - People & Culture committee
 - Youth committee
 - A Pay Policy
- Appointment of new trustees in a process which includes the creation of a new open recruitment policy
- Unconscious bias training for the Board and the Senior Leadership Team
- Revising our community engagement plan
- HR and operational policies review
- Review of programmes and programme committee
- Review of organisational structure

Accuracy

Our preference was to handle concerns directly and privately however over the last year the Group sent their views to the press and shared them on social media. Trade and local press ran articles as the story was relevant to their readership and they felt a responsibility to report on the dispute, especially with local and high-profile alumni attached to the story.

To ensure Wac Arts received a fair hearing, we had to spend a considerable amount of time working positively and collaboratively with the journalists to correct inaccuracies presented by the Group and to secure corrections where appropriate.

For example, claims of “lacerating cuts” are incorrect. Rather than reducing our programme, new arts activities were added in January 2021 with more planned. In October 2020, possibly for the first time ever, all staff were awarded a pay rise, which the Senior Leadership Team chose not to take. Pay rates for hourly paid staff were also raised to at least the London Living Wage.

The Group allege young people no longer feel safe at Wac Arts, however no single concern has been raised to the Charity by any of our current young people or by their parents or carers. Welfare of our young people is our priority and we conduct regular feedback sessions to ensure we understand and act upon all issues and concerns. Some examples from April this year are shown below:

"I learned a lot that I did not know, in a safe and welcoming environment. Five stars" – Senior Wac Arts Member

"I am now better equipped to recognise my own strengths and how my skills can contribute effectively to the type of work I would like to do when working in creative production, cultural programming and idea development." - Wac Arts Young Producer

"The workshops have been incredibly engaging, supportive, and inspiring. They have exposed me to a number of ways to express myself and allowed me to accept my way of expression, explore different roots, and develop new skills. Five stars" – Senior Wac Arts member

Racism

For the first time in Wac Arts’ history its Chief Executive and Chair both come from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, so we have been extremely disappointed that the Group has persisted with alleging institutional racism at Wac Arts. We are instigating new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion practices – none of which have ever been present at Wac Arts.

We Are Open

We have been open about the allegations made and proactively discussed them with many of our key partners and donors who have been sympathetic and supportive. Our approach emphasises how under our new leadership, we will ensure Wac Arts is more transparent than ever. For example, following Justina’s appointment, the Councillor for Belsize ward, Tom Simon, agreed to be an Observer at our quarterly board meetings and we have welcomed him at two so far.

Our policies will be published for everyone to see. New lines of communication to gather feedback from all sections of the community are being developed. Almost all the work we are conducting has never been implemented at Wac Arts. These steps will come with a learning curve for all of us and we may not get everything right first time.

Though some people may disagree with our decisions, we will not be pressured into making changes we do not feel are in the best interests of the communities we serve. Good governance is not just about listening to one viewpoint. We are saddened the Group chose to protest so publicly, rather

than recognise the changes our hardworking staff have made to advance the public benefit Wac Arts provides.

Rejuvenating Wac Arts

Wac Arts' founding mission is as relevant today as it was when it began. We remain absolutely committed to that mission. We want to transform Wac Arts from the Charity born in the 1970s to one capable of flourishing and overcoming the unique challenges of the 21st century.

Since our appointment and despite the enormous challenges posed by COVID-19, the Charity's finances have been stabilised. Recent operating losses have been replaced by an annual surplus to the year ending September 2020. With our financial reserves rebuilding, we will be able to serve the local community better than ever.

We are proud of our staff team who have continued to work hard under the gruelling conditions of the pandemic. It is with their commitment and dedication that we transform the Charity.

Our ambitious plans to grow our creative programme will better support the many thousands of people who for a myriad of reasons, continue to face barriers in our society. We want Wac Arts to have the resources it needs to play its part in tackling persistent inequality in our society.

As Chief Executive, I have spent my entire career helping and leading arts organisations to provide high-quality education in an open, welcoming environment which serves people from all backgrounds equally.

As Chair, Wac Arts' ethos of uplifting people from diverse backgrounds and communities struck a chord with me: I own a business that showcases the talents of underrepresented writers; that highlights the challenges these groups face and helps people become better allies.

Your Input

As valued colleagues, your suggestions, feedback and ideas are always welcome. We would love to hear from you, especially as we begin to emerge from the current lockdown. If you would like to share your thoughts with us, please email feedback@wacarts.co.uk.

We are excited about the future of Wac Arts and hope you are too. Thank you for your continued support.

Darius Khwaja Chief Executive

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Darius', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

03.05.21

Justina Cruickshank Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Justina', with a large, stylized loop at the end.

03.05.21