

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Freelance Practitioner Research Report

Development, creative and production
needs of freelance artists in Northern
Ireland's theatre and dance sectors.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

March 2021



Preface

This independent research, carried out on the Arts Councils behalf by Anabel Jackson Associated Ltd, highlights the vulnerability faced by freelance artists working in Northern Ireland's theatre and dance sectors, which has been deepened and brought into sharper focus by the Covid-19 pandemic. This report identifies the need to find new ways to support the development, creation and production of small to mid-scale work, on an independent basis.

We would like to extend our thanks to the artists who contributed their time to completing the survey, the findings of which provide an extremely vivid and detailed picture of life during the pandemic and clarity in terms of the supports needed as we emerge from lockdown.

The Arts Council is working closely with funders and sector bodies to develop a responsive and realistic programme of supports that meets the range of needs identified in the report and will publish further details later in the year.

The full report, can be found here: <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/ACNI-Freelance-Practitioner-Research-Report.pdf>

Introduction

Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd was appointed to carry out this research in January 2021. The brief was to explore the needs of freelance artists seeking to develop, create and produce small to mid-scale work on an independent basis.

The methodology consisted of:

- A brief review of the literature on the impact of Covid-19 on freelance artists in the UK.
- Consultation with Arts Council officers and the Freelance Theatre Collective to clarify questions and practical possibilities.
- A survey of artists to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the operational possibilities. The original plan was to interview 10-15 artists. However, an initial call for interviewees received 58 responses, so we moved to an online survey so that everyone was included.

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Background on the impact of Covid-19

Statistics and stories about the impact of Covid-19 on the arts emerged from early 2020. Not all reports state the month in which they were produced, which is needed to interpret the results. Research carried out early in the year is likely to substantially understate the impact of the pandemic, since the scale of the lockdowns was not yet clear.

Impact on artists, organisations and audience

Detailed interviews with 65 UK dance artists that we carried out in 2020 for [Pavilion Dance SE and Surf the Wave](#) suggested Covid-19 had three main effects on artists:

- Exposed artists' vulnerability: The portfolio lifestyle was no protection from Covid-19 because financial losses were comprehensive.
- Gave time for reflection: Some artists realised their previous lifestyle, especially touring, was unsustainable. There was a feeling that the system is reliant on artists contributing time well beyond that for which they are paid.
- Stimulated innovation. This was inevitably about working digitally or virtually but also, in opposition to pressures to work online, about creating more direct relationships with audiences.

Ernst and Young, who were appointed by The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon to analyse the economic impact of Covid-19 on the arts¹, identified three separate classes of shock:

- a health crisis restricting the way businesses operate and the way people move;
- a recessionary effect that reduced consumer purchasing power; and
- a behavioural shift that is changing individuals' consumption of products and services, including a shift to digital approaches.

They conclude that: "The Arts sector was one of the first to be hit and is likely to be one of the last to recover from COVID-19."

A large number of surveys have been carried out to measure the impact of the pandemic on arts engagement². Broadly, these show a sharp drop in attendance because of lockdowns, a shaking out of existing and new audiences in terms of digital engagement, and a strong appreciation of the importance of the arts post-pandemic.

UNESCO references four ways states have supported artist during the pandemic:³

- Improving artists' access to social security, pensions and other social benefits.
- Commissioning and purchasing works of art.
- Compensating for lost income and/or enabling artists to continue creating.
- Offering grants for skill development or free online training.

These are in addition to support for arts organisations, such as accelerated payment of grants, temporary relief from regulatory obligations or taxes, compensation for business interruption losses, preferential loans, support for digital platforms and promotion of new business models.

Consultation with NI Theatre Collective

These are my notes of a meeting with six members of the NI Theatre Collective on 4th February 2021. My aim is to present their views as clearly and succinctly as possible, not to add my own perspective.

- Northern Ireland is missing an essential and usual piece of the funding jigsaw: project funding to individual artists, and this is having a detrimental effect on individual artists, audiences, and the arts sector.
- The lack of project funding means that theatre artists feel that they have no autonomy because they are dependent on venues and theatre companies to apply for funding.
- The lack of project funding means that work is necessarily the vision of a small number of artistic directors, often people who have been in position for a long period of time and come from a narrow demographic.

¹ [Employment and Economic Impact Assessment of Covid-19 on The Arts Sector in Ireland.](#)

² [Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on cultural participation | Creative Scotland; Creative Scotland report on Public Intentions on Returning to Audience Members. After the Interval.](#)

³ [Culture in Crisis: Policy guide for a resilient creative sector | Diversity of Cultural Expressions \(unesco.org\)](#)

In its simplest form, the Theatre Collective would like accessible, inclusive and substantial project funding.

Findings from a survey of artists

Responses were received from 64 freelance artists working in Northern Ireland, giving a detailed source of data.

Limitations

Artists were asked, aside from Covid-19, what are the limitations of working as a freelance theatre practitioner in NI? Answers had these themes:

- Lack of funding for freelancers and limited budgets for companies, which means that work cannot be made, or the artist goes into debt or uses crowdfunding to make it, or the artist works through a venue/theatre company and loses control of the work.
- Difficulty hearing about and accessing work opportunities, which leads artists to assume that contracts are not advertised publicly.
- Lack of preparation for a freelance life, especially in terms of university/college education.
- Exploitation in terms of pay and terms of employment.
- Lack of support for older artists, but also lack of support for emerging artists, and some feeling of competition between the two.
- Weak infrastructure, especially for dance.
- Lack of support for people with disabilities.
- Short planning horizons because of the one-year funding time frame.
- Preference for artists outside NI and lack of interest in retaining artists in NI.
- Isolation.

Benefits

I also asked artists about the benefits of working as a freelance theatre/dance practitioner in NI. Answers have these themes:

- The artistic community, in part because of the small size of the theatre/dance sector in NI.
- The pleasure of the work, including the creativity, variety and flexibility of working freelance, and NI heritage.
- The resilience of the artists and the relevance and quality of the work.
- The freedom of creating your own work, and seeing it through with support from other artists.
- Visibility, compared to a larger place.
- The potential for improvement and the relative ease of enacting change across such a small sector.
- Low cost of living.
- None.

Changes needed

I asked to what extent the current situation requires new ways of working e.g. artist leadership models and what kinds of changes are needed. Answers had these themes:

- Higher priority to the arts in general and freelancers in particular.
- Supporting freelancers to make work.
- Faster funding.
- Structures to support artists to produce and present their own work.
- More attention to freelancers' rights, including more open recruitment processes, perhaps a wage for artists, and time for reflection.
- More understanding of audiences in developing product, and more attention to accessibility and diversity.
- Training in, and equipment for, working virtually.
- Multi-year funding.
- New ways of working are not needed.

Impact

- More than half the respondents said that NI is "mixed" as a place to work as a freelance theatre/dance practitioner. Comments suggest that artists feel they need to leave NI to find the training and funding they need.
- 86% of respondents have considered relocating from NI, and 65% have already lived outside NI at some stage.
- 44% of respondents said they had work that you couldn't make in NI (before Covid-19). The most commonly mentioned barrier was lack of funding.
- 39% of respondents said they have work that they wanted to tour to or from NI and couldn't (before Covid-19). Again the main barrier mentioned was funding.
- More than half of respondents (53%) said they have international connections that they would like to strengthen through touring.

Gaps in product

I asked what type of dance/theatre is not being made in NI (ignoring Covid-19). Answers included:

- Experimental or innovative work.
- New writing.
- Cross artform work e.g. with music, dance, poetry.
- Political theatre and political satires.
- Classical, physical, immersive and musical theatre.
- Educational, verbatim and open air theatre.
- Intercultural dance.
- Accessible theatre.
- Solo performance work.
- Site specific dance.
- Dance for new audiences.

Roles

Respondents have had many different roles in the sector.

- The most frequently mentioned were: actor (44%), teacher/tutor (44%), facilitator (38%), producer (34%), playwright (31%), director (31%), dancer (28%) and writer (23%). Other roles included: dramaturg, designer, front of house, marketing/PR, mentor, stage manager, rehearsal director, dance artist in Health and the Community, board member of a theatre company, video and lighting tech and live modelling.
- Findings suggest that respondents would on average like to have less involvement in facilitation, teaching, front of house, but also, interestingly, in production.
- Nearly half (46%) of respondents said they got 80-100% of their theatre/dance work through NI venues or theatre/dance companies.

Funding

- 80% of respondents said they have applied to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for funding, and 75% said they have received funding, mainly SIAP, IERP, Resilience Funding, and travel awards.
- 84% of respondents had not received funding from another arts council. The 'other' responses referred to Australian and Mexican funding.

Conclusions

Demands

This research demonstrates clear demand from theatre and dance freelance artists for project funding. Artists make a strong case that project funding would support their own development, but also bring more varied and experimental work to NI, which could help to broaden and diversify audiences. However, creating an effective and fair project based programme will take careful thought and planning.

The different requirements placed on any future programme would be to:

- Distribute substantial sums of money, but also have a simple accountability system.
- Treat artists as leaders, but also avoid giving them responsibilities, especially production responsibilities, they do not want.
- Be widely publicised so that all eligible artists hear about it, but also avoid wasting artists' time in having a low acceptance rate.
- Move beyond the existing structure of venues and companies, but also strengthen artists' connections to and status with these organisations.

I suggest these principles for a possible freelancer project programme:

Clarity

The programme will need clear criteria so that artists can see if their work will fit, no mean feat given that the aim is to encompass work that has not yet been delivered or even thought about before. Narrowing down could be achieved by having themes, which could be about place (e.g. rural locations) or format (e.g. outdoor or non-traditional venues).

Customisation

The programme will need the ability to combine financial support with advice, mentoring, and possibly access to equipment or space. It will need to embrace different structures e.g. artist collaborations, but also extended relationships with venues.

Contextualisation

The programme will need to work within, and help to develop, the rest of the performing arts ecosystem. The challenges that the artists describe are not just about the lack of project funding, but also about other challenges, the result of years of chronic underfunding to the Arts Council and the arts in Northern Ireland.

For example, venues and companies might benefit from:

- guidance on good practice around procurement, contracts with freelancers and pay;
- encouragement to produce strategies for how they will work with freelancers; and
- leadership development.

Local authorities might benefit from:

- support in recruiting and working with artists;
- help in broadening and diversifying audiences for their venues; and
- encouragement to programme more experimental work.

HE colleges might benefit from:

- further discussions about how to prepare students for a freelance life, although this has been considered for many years, with some action resulting.

The Arts Council might benefit from:

- a more explicit priority to the wellbeing of artists;
- a reframing of touring to encompass longer term relationships between venues and artists with a more central role for, and strategic approach to, building new audiences.

My brief was to research freelancers in theatre and dance. However, some of these conclusions might apply to freelancers in other artforms, and to cross-artform working.

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