



**FREELANCERS  
MAKE  
THEATRE  
WORK**

## OMICRON VARIANT IMPACT SURVEY

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF THE OMICRON VARIANT FOR THE PERIOD  
DECEMBER 2021 – JANUARY 2022

DESIGNED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE DEPARTMENT FOR  
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

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## **FREELANCERS MAKE THEATRE WORK**

Freelancers Make Theatre Work are an inclusive, independent community for the 200,000+ self-employed and freelance workers from all areas of theatre, opera, dance, and live performance, who make up 70% of the UK theatre workforce.

They campaign to raise awareness of the vital role of freelancers in the theatre industry and provide a platform to collect the concerns of the freelance theatre workforce with the commitment to express them to decision makers who impact our work.

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## **OMICRON VARIANT IMPACT SURVEY**

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport are working with a number of sectoral bodies to further build their evidence base on the impact of the Omicron variant on freelancers across the Performing Arts sector in England - (devolved Administrations are responsible for arts policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Freelancers Make Theatre Work were connected with DCMS via Society of Theatres London in the week commencing 20th December. During this week Freelancers Make Theatre Work and DCMS met to discuss the most appropriate means of gathering evidence whilst taking into consideration the time of year and deep sense of fatigue in the sector.

DCMS evidence-building is looking at a range of sources, including organisations across the performing arts sector. This work is not an official government survey but, as DCMS wanted to understand the scale of the challenges faced as a result of the Omicron variant, Freelancers Make Theatre Work members felt that it was important that information be gathered directly from freelancers.

The deadline for data gathering was 31st December 2021. This created a short window to disseminate the survey, and then gather and analyse responses. The survey was therefore kept as short as possible in the hope of returning as many responses as possible.

The survey was released on Sunday 26th December (allowing for Christmas Day) with a deadline of midnight on Thursday 30th December (allowing time for data to be sent to DCMS). Freelancers Make Theatre Work has undertaken this work on a voluntary basis

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## KEY INFORMATION

Over the 5-day sharing period the survey reached 135,000 unique people across social media, the Freelancers Make Theatre Work website and the Freelancers Make Theatre Work newsletter.

### **1,983 Freelancers Responded to the survey.**

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

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## SUMMARY OF RESULTS: WORK LOST DECEMBER 2021 – JANUARY 2022

### IMPACT

74% of freelancers surveyed have lost work between 13 Dec 2021 and 3<sup>rd</sup> Jan 2022 due to COVID.  
77% of those who have lost work were contracted on a self-employed basis.

57% of those who have lost work have had work terminated.  
43% of those who have lost work have had work delayed.

47% of those who have had work delayed foresee clashes with other contracts, leading to an impact on their overall income.

34% of those who have had worked delayed cannot yet state if it will create clashes with other work leading to an impact on their overall income.

### INCOME LOSS

55% of those impacted state an income loss of £0-£1999.  
30% of those impacted state an income loss of £2000-£4999.  
15% of those impacted state an income loss of £5000+

### LOCATION

49% of work lost was due to take place in London.  
18% of work lost was touring work.  
8% of work lost was due to take place in the Southwest of England.  
7% of work lost was due to take place in the Southeast of England.  
5% of work lost was due to take place in the Northwest of England.  
4% of work lost was due to take place in Yorkshire and the Humber.  
3% of work lost was due to take place in the Northeast of England.  
3% of work lost was due to take place in the West Midlands.  
2% of work lost was due to take place in the East Midlands.  
2% of work lost was due to take place in the East of England.

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## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS: ANTICIPATED WORK LOST JANUARY – MARCH 2022**

### **IMPACT**

27% of those surveyed have already lost work for the period January – March 2022 due to COVID.  
73% of those surveyed anticipate losing work for the period January – March 2022 due to COVID.

79% of those who have already lost work or anticipate losing work are contracted on a self-employed basis.

41% of those who have already lost work have had work terminated.  
59% of those who have already lost work have had work delayed.

52% of those who have had work delayed foresee clashes with other contracts, leading to an impact on their overall income.

40% of those who have had work delayed cannot yet state if it will create clashes with other work leading to an impact on their overall income.

### **INCOME LOSS**

30% of those impacted state an income loss/ anticipated income loss of £0-£1999.  
40% of those impacted state an income loss/ anticipated income of £2000-£4999.  
30% of those impacted state an income loss/ anticipated income of £5000+

### **LOCATION**

43% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in London.  
28% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was touring work.  
7% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in the Southwest of England.  
7% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in the Southeast of England.  
4% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in the Northwest of England.  
4% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in Yorkshire and the Humber.  
2% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in the Northeast of England.  
3% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in the West Midlands.  
2% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in the East Midlands.  
2% of work lost/ anticipated to be lost was due to take place in the East of England.

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## ADDITIONAL RESPONSES

The survey offered respondents space to add anything else they felt relevant. 372 respondents added comments, summarised below.

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## SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

*“A critical support package is needed to ensure businesses and individuals sustain livelihoods and career continuation. The ignorance of any support so far has been heart breaking and makes me question so many things in terms of the way the arts are valued but crucially how our jobs are somehow seen as a luxury rather than careers.”*

Several respondents noted that the **limited scope of the survey** does not offer a true context which recognises the cumulative impact of COVID on the industry.

It was noted that the different means of remuneration available - such as box office percentages and royalties - or the initial outlay costs - both financial such as marketing and time related during negotiations – create **multiple impacts on incomes**. With several respondents referencing the **loss of work out with traditional venues** as their key concern.

The **cumulative impacts** of COVID have resulted to a decrease of work on offer for multiple reasons, with a significant reduction in opportunity to work internationally due to varying restrictions/ isolation periods.

Respondents have noticed that **less work is on offer**, with a **reduction in opportunities for international working** impacting incomes. Some disabled workers have had to turn down work due to safety concerns.

For those who do secure work the **impact of cancellation clauses** and **last-minute contracting practices** are noted as concerns. The **overall workflow of the industry is changing**, with many referencing a **bottleneck emerging** due to contracts overlapping when delayed and **additional work being created** by cancellations and isolation periods.

Respondents also noted the **wider impact on the economic sustainability for freelancers** in the industry, recognising that many are still recovering from having fallen through gaps in the support offered to date. With many noting that they feel **unable to plan** in the immediate or long term. There is great concern around having to **leave the industry** from individuals at all career stages, with reference to the current **culture of fear and stress** being unsustainable.

Respondent’s desire **clearer and information** from Government, including advanced planning for worst case scenarios so that continuity could be found across the sector.

Many respondents reference the detrimental impact the ongoing effects of Covid are having on their **mental health and wellbeing**, as well as the impact on their loved ones.

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## DETAILED SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

### CONCERNS AROUND LIMITED DATA GATHERING

Several respondents commented on the limited scope of the survey both in terms of the information requested and the reductive nature of the survey, given that it exists in a context of almost two years of impact on the industry and that the industry is more than employment by venues.

Two respondents commented that they are employed on zero hours contracts. It is unclear whether this form of employment will be registered in the data of organisations and therefore whether this will be a factor in DCMS's interpretation of the data.

### MULTIPLE IMPACTS ON INCOMES

Many respondents illustrated impacts upon their income broader than the scope of the survey, and in ways that are less explicit than contracts producing performance.

One freelancer surveyed noted that they 'will lose royalties from 10 days' worth of cancelled performances of a sold-out Christmas show', with others stating that their income is a percentage of takings which have been directly impacted by audience confidence. This includes live arts such as comedy which are heavily reliant on ticket sales. There is fear this impact will continue into the Spring.

Some respondents have lost casual venue work, which they deem essential to the function of theatre and small music venues, which has not been recognised through furlough or other Government support to date. Others state that some work (such as front of house, box office and stage door) is now being offered as casual work, without any protection against cancellation.

Event organisers noted that cancellations results in loss of income as well as irretrievable sunk costs associated.

Some specialist freelancers notes that certain production elements (such as pyrotechnics) are being removed from productions which are being restaged as a means to save money, resulting in an income loss for those who offer these services.

One respondent stated that they have '*agreed a reduced fee to help an arts organisation with reduced ticket income.*'

### FINANCIAL IMPACT BEYOND VENUES AND TRADITIONAL THEATRE

Respondents commented that their work in fields beyond traditional venues has been impacted, and as such has reduced their income. This includes running workshops in care homes, delivering work in village halls, schools touring, participatory dance events, festivals and outdoor arts industry that is reliant on people gathering, corporate performance work as a circus artist and teaching music in schools. This demonstrates the range of ways performance makers and artists engage with society and generate incomes.

### IMPACT ON ALTERNATIVE INCOME STRAND

One respondent noted that they offer accommodation to touring theatre workers, and as such has lost this income altogether. Suggesting there may be impacts on the supply chain for theatre that are not being reflected in data.

## CUMULATIVE IMPACTS OF COVID

*"I anticipate losing work as our producers won't be able to keep paying us if the show suffers multiple shutdowns. They have paid us for an initial closure but won't be able to keep doing that."*

Several respondents noted that, although they understand the purpose of the survey capturing data for such a limited window, they wish to note how the cumulative impact of COVID has changed their working lives. Outgoings have not reduced, however the lack of certainty in the sector makes financial planning difficult.

Respondents noted that working as a theatre freelancer often requires investment prior to work being undertaken. For example, in pre-production and marketing activities or in time spent securing contracts which, if they don't result in contracts, return no income.

Some noted that income from contracts is being remunerated at a slower pace, creating cash flow issues in the short term.

One respondent commented that they feel there is *"currently too much noise and therefore response to the commercial sector (West End and high profile producers) and not enough on the grassroots industry that keeps local communities cultural hearts beating. Sometimes I wonder if DCMS even knows people like me exist."*

There is concern over the long-term impact of COVID due to audience and producer confidence.

## LESS WORK ON OFFER

*"There is less work in general so much harder to get anything in the first place."*

Many respondents commented that the survey is reductively predicated on contracts being offered to measure the impact of Omicron on freelance incomes. They feel that the reduction in work available due to low industry confidence is a 'huge concern' that must be registered. This includes noting that there appears to be a trend of casts and crews are becoming smaller than pre-covid, as a means to mitigate risk, which results in less work being available.

One respondent noted that larger venues are now using in house staff to deliver freelance roles where possible in order to save costs. They also stated, that as someone who lives outside of London but has usually worked with National touring companies, their workload has reduced.

They also noted that historically it has generally been rare to sign contracts far in advance, so that many lose work without contractual evidence of doing so.

Some noted that the work that is taking place is the revival of delayed work, creating limited opportunity to secure future work once those contracts are complete.

Individuals who categorise themselves as 'less-established' commented that work opportunities are becoming increasingly limited for those without established names or networks because they are viewed as more of a risk by producers.

One respondent stated that the *'quality of work available is poor'* and that *'most of the roles on offer for women over 55 are pitiful.'*

This suggests overall concerns that the overall diversity of the work force is also at risk.

## **DISABLED WORKERS**

The income of disabled workers and those with long term health conditions has been directly impacted through having to turn down work due to concerns around safety, with particular reference to the transmissibility of the Omicron variant.

## **INTERNATIONAL WORKING**

*"I think COVID will have a lasting impact over the way that touring work happens. I don't ever anticipate my diary being as busy as it was pre covid with regards to international touring work "*

Many respondents noted that their income has been negatively impacted by a reduction in opportunities for international touring. This includes having to cancel opportunities to audition for international work, removing the possibility of securing future work.

Some of this work was lost or had to be refused due to the financial implication of long periods of isolation/ quarantine on either the producer or the individual which can impact the start date of the next contract. One respondent stated that 'it is a nightmare' managing the changing dates due to changing restrictions.

## **INSECURE CONTRACTS AND THE IMPACT OF CANCELLATION CLAUSES**

Respondents noted that there is greater reticence to confirm work in advance than pre-COVID with a culture on pencilling work becoming more common. This means that if work is cancelled freelancers are left with no employment and no safety net. One respondent noted that fee negotiations are also happening at a later stage, and that they anticipate fees will be lower than expected due to the ongoing impact and uncertainty.

Force Majeure clauses in contracts were noted as a concern, with some noting that their pay can be stopped immediately in light of cancellations.

Some respondents noted that due to the nature of their work, contracts are short (1-6 weeks), meaning that if they have to isolate then they lose the entire contract.

One respondent noted that those who test positive for COVID during a contract can self-isolate with reasonable sick pay, but for those who test positive towards the end of/ after the contract they isolate with statutory sick pay only which creates a pay disparity.

One respondent noted that COVID may be cited as a reason to delay/terminate contracts without evidence, creating a 'catch-all for any issues surrounding event production'.

## **IMPACT ON WORKFLOW**

The impact on the overall workflow of the sector is cited as a concern by many respondents. One respondent states that this has directly impacted working relationships which are now unstable and 'hyper competitive, mainly'.

This includes last minute cancellations and last-minute work offers creating significant planning difficulties, as well as the reduction in work available out with traditional venues that is often used by freelancers to generate income during quieter periods (such as higher education).

The act of being availability checked results in turning down other work and then losing out on both jobs in the event of a cancellation. Although this has always been in issue in the industry COVID appears to have heightened the issue.

Some roles are experiencing huge skills shortages (reasons uncited), meaning that although work is offered people are having to turn it down due to being 'unbelievably busy'. This creates future concerns around the quality of work that will be produced.

The process of moving rehearsal online to mitigate risk is creating strain for those whose work cannot be conducted online (such as costume departments), who are then having to work last minute to ensure productions are stage ready. This is resulting in additional labour that is not factored into the fixed fees offered.

Some freelancers are also concerned that their role will be viewed as a luxury as budgets are tightened as a response to uncertainty.

This workflow is also impacted by the ongoing efficacy of the Governments Covid response. Some productions have not been able to obtain Lateral Flow Test kits, resulting in being unable to work whilst being ready.

## **A BOTTLENECK**

*"it is a nightmare - one change of dates impacts the next job and then that impacts the next and the next and the next..."*

For those who have secured work, delayed contracts and the rescheduling of cancelled work is creating issues for several reasons. Including reduced income due to having to turn down work when it begins to overlap; increased stress and unhealthy working hours if continuing with jobs as they begin to overlap and not being able to safely travel between work in various locations across the country,

One respondent states that *"Employers have started building "delay" clauses into contracts where they require you to be available for up to 2 weeks after the nominal end of the contract in case of delays due to Covid 19 but they are not offering to pay to keep you on a retainer for that time. Either you risk double booking or you lose out on up to 2 weeks of work per 4 week contract, which is unsustainable."*

## **ADDITIONAL WORK GENERATED THROUGH CANCELLATION**

Some roles are suffering from additional work generated because of cancellations, illness or required isolation periods. Short staffing required other crew members to 'take up the slack' and results in the requirement to work longer hours to cover last minute rehearsals.

For some, this has resulted in their fixed fee resulting in remuneration of less than minimum union rates when considering the additional hours worked.

## **POOR PRACTICE**

One respondent stated that improved practices in terms of fee structures for freelancers, which had been developing pre-pandemic and discussed earlier during the pandemic, have been undermined with covert bullying, hysteria and scapegoating taking place generally.

## **BROADER IMPACT OF ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY**

The survey highlighted that economic sustainability is reliant on multiple factors, in response to individuals living in a variety of circumstances and the ongoing impacts of COVID.

Several respondents stated that they have not been eligible for any state aid (SEISS, Furlough or hardship bursaries) for the duration of the pandemic. Some of these were ineligible due to being new to the industry or newly self-employed; due to the nature of work they have to undertake as a theatre freelancer (a combination of PAYE and freelance contracts) and others because they have previously been high earners (£50k+).

Some respondents reference surviving through spending 'life savings' and noted that people with savings were penalised in the mid-term.

One respondent stated that *'there is a particular lack of support for artists who are UK visa holders and self-employed, as we are not eligible to obtain any public/ government funding, yet need proof of significant career progression in order to continue working in the UK.'* This has a specific impact on recent graduates.

Respondents noted that the guidelines for Universal Credit do not appear to understand the nature of freelance work in the creative industries and that the system is a *'massive struggle'* to navigate.

Those who undertake freelance work through Limited Companies (some of whom work this way to secure higher public liability insurance as required by clients) note that not meeting the guidelines for furlough impacted their income, and that the instruction to apply to the Cultural Recovery Fund is too complicated as an individual. They also note that loan options are not sufficient.

One respondent noting that they work part time due to childcare commitments so the five days' work that was cancelled in early January reflects 50% of their monthly income. Reflecting a possible need for more data on the impact on part-time workers.

Others noted that they supplement their income through the supply chain companies for the theatre and events industry for whom support grants were not offered, therefore have had all potential income streams impacted.

One respondent noted that they have several outstanding unpaid invoices.

## **UNCERTAIN FUTURES**

*"The ongoing uncertainty has made planning and progressing in my career impossible for the immediate future."*

Many respondents commented on the ongoing impact with regards to planning both their immediate and long-term futures in relation to their career and life aspirations. Noting that staying in the industry is reliant on good will and resilience. Many state that they anticipate further losses and that they have *'barely recovered from previous lockdowns.'*

Respondents raised concerns about the uncertain impact of Long Covid, and the impact on those who must turn down contracts to protect vulnerable family members. They believe they are *'paying the price'* for having to make decisions regarding safety.

## **LEAVING THE INDUSTRY**

Many respondents have considered that they may need to leave the industry, either permanently or for the foreseeable future in order to pursue economic security. Some respondents stated that they have already been *'forced to change career'*, with some of these having worked in the industry for 20 plus years.

For those who feel able to remain in the industry there is concern around lost career momentum and some noted that we *'risk an irreversible talent drain'*. Others noted that the creativity of the industry is suffering as producers become more risk averse in response to the crisis.

Some respondents noted moving to careers in film or television as it offers more sustainability.

Respondents also noted the significant impact on families where all earners are reliant on the theatre or live performance industry.

## **A CULTURE OF FEAR AND STRESS**

*"It is the most anxiety inducing state to be working in and is not sustainable in any way."*

Respondents reflected living in a culture of fear and stress, feeling unable to complete the survey with confidence as they know the situation could shift quickly and at any moment.

Some commented that there is no contingency for the worst case scenarios, and that differing Covid policies has led to a *'a lot of stress and uncertainty at a company and individual level'* and being *'utterly at the mercy of covid restrictions'*.

Work is being offered in a *'cycle of feast and famine'*, with the industry *'stumbling from one frantically adrenalised emergency to another'*. Deadlines being reduced and transferring stress to the individuals who undertake contracts for work required.

## **INFORMATION**

Respondents voiced a general request for longer term solutions and planning - including pre-emptively planning for changing restrictions at Government level - stating that the cumulative stress of re-planning performances and mixed messaging is leading to an increase in avoidable cancellations.

Many believe that Government messaging could be clearer and would prefer decisions to be made earlier to enable more effective action and continuity, with some respondents stating that the different guidelines of different employers leads to increased stress and confusion.

## **HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

Respondent's reference mental exhaustion, terror and the *'brutal effect on our loved ones'*, as well as the fear of taking Lateral Flow Tests in case the result impacts the ability to take work.

One respondent simply commented *'I am broken'* whilst another states that the impact of Covid has *'Ruined my Life.'* The situation is having a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the workforce.