

**FREELANCERS
MAKE
THEATRE
WORK**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**OPEN TO ALL,
BUT NOT OPEN ALL HOURS**

Hope and fears for the future of the
UK's entertainment industries

Big Freelancer Survey 2022, September 2022

The COVID pandemic has had a devastating impact on the UK's entertainment industry, particularly its freelance workforce.

This report presents the findings of a mixed-methods survey of freelance workers conducted in February 2022. It is the second in a planned series of five Big Freelancer surveys (2020-2025), designed to provide evidence-based insight into the acute impact of the pandemic, as well as in-depth understanding of its impact over time, including how its effects intersect with longer term, pre-pandemic issues such as chronic insecurity and precarity. The survey highlights COVID as a 'crisis within a crisis', one which is multi-faceted and which freelancers see as rapidly becoming a missed opportunity to understand and introduce changes needed to tackle chronic, structural inequalities across the industry and ensure its fair and sustainable future. The report highlights some of the many challenges for those who tried to keep the 'show on the road' during the pandemic. It also reflects on the longer-term implications opened up by the pandemic for freelancers and the entertainment sector more widely, and the challenges faced by those campaigning for an equitable and sustainable future for the UK's world-renowned entertainment industries. **The report highlights:**

- COVID as a multi-faceted crisis within a crisis in an industry in which insecurity and precarity were widespread, pre-pandemic concerns, and in which its freelance workforce were ill-prepared to cope with the sudden loss of income. The survey highlights the multi-faceted nature of the COVID crisis with reference to widespread perceptions of job insecurity, concerns about safety, harassment and discrimination, and a potential retention crisis and skills shortage, which in turn raises significant concerns about workplace health and safety. Relating to concerns about pay inequalities, scheduling practices and unfair and/or unsafe working conditions was the

demand, widely believed to be accentuated post-COVID, for freelancers to take on more roles and responsibilities than are fair or safe.

- There was a widespread feeling that 'the show can't go on' as it was pre-COVID, and shouldn't, with many references to the toxic effects of this as an unsustainable ethic. One participant summed up the hopes of many by wishing for 'Better working hours, proper breaks, proper staffing, more accessibility to all, no bullying or discrimination, equal opportunities. Less of the show must go on no matter what attitude'. Another said, "The show must go on" is a lovely sentiment ... but it must only go on if it is safe to do so, with properly paid workers both on and off stage, who aren't working outside of their skill set or comfort zone'. Another summed up widespread concerns about pressure to take on work beyond the necessary experience or skill set, or pay, saying that the requirement to 'take on roles [you are] not trained/qualified for or basically work above and beyond without financial recognition' is ubiquitous, compromising safety and accentuating precarity. Another said, 'I fear that many theatres are currently prioritising profit over people ... 'the show must go on' attitude is damaging and exclusionary'.
- For those considering leaving the industry, the most common reasons for leaving were concerns about financial insecurity, poor pay and working conditions, and a growing mental health crisis, widely believe to be a 'silent epidemic' in the industry, necessitating the need to take 'rights, rates and respect' seriously. Many respondents linked low/no pay to overwork as an endemic problem impacting on mental health in ways that must be tackled. As one respondent put it, 'I've never paid tax and that's not because I have a great

accountant - it's simply that I work ... 50 hours a week on average on minimum wage or less. It's just totally unsustainable'.

The survey also highlights that while these concerns were widespread across the freelance workforce, participants who identified as living with a condition that they view as impacting on their lives (e.g. a disability or other condition), as being part of the global majority, or from working class backgrounds were disproportionately concerned about job security, safety at work, harassment and discrimination. Freelancers who identified as being from working class backgrounds highlighted precarity as a major barrier to entering and remaining in the industry, e.g. 'I'm very seriously considering retraining and leaving the arts altogether. I have worked in the arts for 16 years and my freelance income was my only income for several years before the pandemic. Freelancers, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have so many barriers to participation beyond money. But money is the biggest barrier for many of us and we need more support and security to stay. I'm encouraged by orgs like Strike A Light committing to employing artists for a year. More organizations should be looking to support freelancers in ways like this'.

The survey highlights widespread concerns about working conditions including bullying, harassment and other forms of discrimination. 53% of all respondents reported that they had witnessed one or more forms of harassment and/or discrimination in the past twelve months. The incidents witnessed totalled 1701, and included unfair treatment (25%), sexism (19%), bullying (18%) and racism (10%). 48% of those who had witnessed an incident stated that it had not been reported. Of those who answered 'yes', the incident had been reported, 48% stated that the incident had not been appropriately

dealt with and 26% didn't know whether it had or not (totalling 74%).

Again, while these concerns are widespread, the survey highlights important differences among survey participants. Compared to the 53% of all respondents who said that they had witnessed one or more incident that they would describe as harassment and/or discrimination in the past twelve months, this figure rose to 70% for those who identified as belonging to the global majority, for those who identified as living with a condition that they viewed as impacting on their working lives, and amongst those who identified their gender as different to that assigned at birth.

The survey highlights a widespread view that precarity, insecurity and poor working conditions for all cannot be addressed without tackling the inequalities that are widely believed to be endemic across the industry. These inequalities are understood to pre-date the pandemic but to have been considerably worsened by it. 'Education not exclusion' is understood to be key to a fair and sustainable future for the industry. Tackling 'rampant' class, gender, and racial inequalities, a 'burn out' culture and the creation of a supportive environment across different stages of the life course in an industry deemed to be 'riddled with ageism', and mired by 'rampant sexism and racism', inaccessible to those with a range of access and disability related needs, were all noted as priorities. Inter-sectional inequalities were also noted as being in urgent need of recognition. And concerns were raised about how the demographic contours of inequality intersected with regional disparities perpetuating barriers to entry and disadvantage across the entertainment industry e.g. based on unequal access to opportunities for training, exposure, networking, funding, etc.

Of immediate concern is the insight the survey provides into the extent to which the UK entertainment industry's freelance workforce is extremely ill-prepared to cope with the rising cost of living crisis, with many reporting having already sustained substantial, and for some unserviceable, loss of savings and increased debt during the pandemic. Many reported being faced with the dilemma of needing to earn money but being unable to live and work in London and other urban areas on what freelance jobs in the arts pay ('having to pay to work'). One participant summed up what they saw as the freelancer's work cycle: 'work for exposure and experience, burn out and leave', going on to say, 'we need to break this destructive cycle'.

This growing financial crisis (based on pre-pandemic underpayment/insecurity, the loss of savings/accrual of debt sustained during COVID and the growing cost of living), combined with concerns about the impact of Brexit resulted in (a) widespread calls for a thorough review of the funding infrastructure across the industry and (b) equally widespread pessimism about the future viability of the industry.

But many held out hope that the industry would continue to play a vital social, economic and cultural role, and that it could become a fairer work environment in the future: 'I wish it to be a fairer, more honest, decent, exhilarating, unbiased, unprejudiced, and happier industry. I wish it to bring joy and pleasure to all who experience it as participants in whatever form. I hope it can continue to entertain, educate, explain, inform, protest, challenge, object, oppose and to encourage thought, conversations and debates'. Many of the 1497 survey respondents made recommendations for change that they hoped would substantially improve not simply the quality but the

very viability of their working lives and those of others, opening-up the possibility of a more equitable, sustainable future for the industry as it seeks to make a full and fair recovery from the pandemic, and to survive the cost of living crisis.

These recommendations include:

- 1. Funding to subsidise better accessibility**, including for those who work in the industry. As one participant put it, 'I study and work in theatre yet can't actually afford to go'. Another said, 'I can't afford to take my godson to see a West End show and I have worked in the industry for over 10 years. Freelancers are the lifeblood of the industry but can't afford to engage in it - says it all really'. Better support for regional theatre and subsidised ticket prices for London-based theatre ('ticket prices are very concerning in terms of exclusion'), deemed to be vital to building a more accessible and sustainable future, with West End theatres being referred to e.g. as 'elitist fortresses' for audiences and workers. Suggestions were made by many respondents that prices should be controlled or subsidised more to improve accessibility and sustainability.
- 2. Better and more consistently regulated work environments**, with improved enforcement and more accessible advice and HR support, improved contractual arrangements and working conditions, with clear routes to advice and enforcement for non-compliance with relevant legislation, policy, and good practice guidelines. An 'enforcement gap', with limited recourse for freelancers to tackle it individually or collectively was widely noted. One suggestion made was that commercial producers who don't adhere to safe working hours and practices 'should be listed by SOLT'.
- 3. Guarantees of a fair, safe and healthy work environment.** For the industry not just to recover but to flourish, many respondents felt that what is needed is 'a real industry reset', involving 'fair pay for fair work'. Concerns were also raised about being on call on days away from work as both unfair and detrimental to a safe, healthy work environment. Productions that only pay after the contract has finished were raised as an ongoing concern.
- 4. Access to training and development opportunities, holiday and sick pay, and paid maternity/parenting leave on a par with PAYE employees.** The most widespread calls were for greater equality, fair pay and improved working conditions, including greater parity with those who are employed by venues/productions. For some, a better regulatory and support structure was identified as a possible route to tackling some of the worst excesses of persistent inequalities, e.g. 'making sure artists are paid for meetings, that they are given clear briefs and told upfront how much they can expect to get paid, and most importantly that they are paid in a timely manner should be the bare minimum of what organisations can do to help'.
- 5. Better investment in and support for digital work, in the interests of accessibility and sustainability** e.g. 'where digital work is possible it should be supported, enabling better access'. As well as a more equitable, financially sustainable infrastructure, many participants expressed their view that investment in technology is needed in order to 'future proof' jobs and the industry should another pandemic or similar situation arise. The belief that 'virtual and hybrid events are here to stay' but are likely to complement rather than replace live arts was widespread. This was seen as an important opportunity to improve accessibility and to secure jobs should another lockdown happen. As one participant put it, 'I hope to see more protection for freelance workers in the future, if something like the pandemic

happens again it would be nice to know that the support structure is already there, including the technology.

6. **Greater financial and environmental accountability** e.g. by recognizing the value of re-using and re-purposing materials (such as sets and props) – ‘surely we can learn to reuse and adapt more; to work more with existing features, props, etc. and importantly, to recognise and applaud the shows that do it?’
7. **More creative, collaborative ways of working and funding infrastructures to support creative hubs**, e.g. ‘for theatre especially, the ability for collectives of artists to band together for single large projects without forming a company, and the flexibility to co-create work’.
8. The importance of, and need for, fully funded training and development opportunities for all freelance workers was widely referred to, including to **raise awareness of workplace rights**. And many suggested that these support mechanisms should be better targeted at career stages, e.g. ‘there needs to be more support out there for young freelancers in the arts in terms of setting their rates and knowing their worth. That’s something I have really struggled with and still do! More help is needed on this’. Support targeted at those new to the industry/early careers was noted as a priority, with calls for ‘more support for new graduates ... so for example having finance classes, mentorship and focus groups to make contacts’.
9. **An adequate, industry-wide safeguarding system** was noted as a priority (with venue/sector variability being of concern).
10. Some **solutions to concerns about a growing mental health crisis** were simple e.g. ‘I’d like every venue to have a quiet break room, just to be able to take a breather’; others more fundamental: ‘I’d like to not have to fight all the time’.
11. **Better voice and representation for freelancers** e.g. ‘I am keen that freelancers are consulted by public bodies and subsidised companies in a more meaningful way and that their advice is demonstrably taken on board and used to guide future decision making’. Calls for a freelancers union were widely raised: ‘A decent freelancers union and pay rate card is desperately overdue’, and ‘freelancers need a dedicated union, a federation that unites and promotes the fair treatment and rights of practitioners across the arts’. Others emphasized the need for collective action on pay and working conditions, e.g. ‘we all need to lobby for sick pay, holiday pay, bereavement leave, maternity and paternity pay, pensions and mental health days that employed staff benefit from’. Calls were made for professional bodies to play a more proactive role in making the industry ‘get its act together’: ‘[I hope] that the UK theatre industry gets its act together and starts co-ordinating around an ecosystem wide regulatory body for improved working conditions and protections for its freelance workforce. Its current employment practices are unethical. Covid-19 didn’t put me in the position I am now in... 20 years working in UK theatre did’.
12. **Meaningful action on equality**: Rhetorical commitments to equality that were not borne out in practice and remained ‘empty statements’, or ‘false promises about accessibility’ were also widespread concerns, e.g. ‘How can companies claim to care about

mental health and well-being and then in practice do things like never informing actors if they have been successful in auditions? (Professional ghosting)'. Suggestions made to tackle persistent inequalities included compulsory unconscious bias, micro-aggression, and equality awareness training for ALL employees, including the most senior staff (e.g. as part of compulsory health and safety assessments/certification and/ or funding mechanisms), and the widespread adoption, enforcement and monitoring of codes of conduct/good practice guidelines. One respondent said, 'In 19 years I've had zero training at work or offers of career advancement in any aspect of the work I do'. A more proactive approach (e.g. meeting disabled and neurodivergent people's needs as universal accommodations rather than 'ad hoc' or on request adjustments), and advertising these as part of recruitment processes was also suggested. Greater clarity and consistency in practicing blind casting across the industry was widely called for.

13. The need for greater transparency (e.g. about pay inequalities, jobs being advertised widely, outside of paywalls) was widely raised, as was better and more widespread use of job shares for those who need more flexibility to accommodate caring and other responsibilities. More accessible methods of recruiting staff were also raised, including references to better advertising beyond established networks that perpetuate existing inequalities, and more video/online based applications than forms e.g. 'I would love to see more opportunities for the neurodiverse community including less form applications and more availability of video applications'.

14. Calls for a funding review that takes the possibility of UBI seriously were widespread in the data as were calls for funding for schemes and organizations like PiPA (that support working parents/carers). Many felt that what is badly needed in order to make a fair and sustainable recovery from COVID is, as one participant put it, 'a strong infrastructure that supports creativity'. Established working methods and processes, and pay structures were widely perceived as not working. The need to seriously evaluate the potential introduction of UBI was widely raised, as was the need for greater pay transparency, fair pay, and a funding review to tackle persistent inequalities; as one participant put it, 'the funding model needs ripping apart'. Some participants felt that this should be part of a fundamental review of the industry, e.g. 'the entire industry needs to be dismantled and rebuilt from the ground up. This is not about small changes. The industry is broken'. Another said, 'we have to do something about it, reinvent, recalibrate and reconfigure'. Suggestions were widely made that funding bodies should assess applications for evidence of 'fair pay' in proposed budgets, with follow-up checks being made. Concerns were raised about budgetary shortfalls disproportionately impacting on freelance workers, with budgets not covering adequate time for rehearsals resulting in freelancers being expected to 'do more for less', an ethos that many felt should be replaced by a 'fairer is better' way of working underpinned by greater respect for the value of freelance work and workers e.g. 'I hope the industry wakes up to the value of freelancers and treats them with respect and not as disposable workers who have to work all the hours under the sun to complete incorrectly budgeted programming'.

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