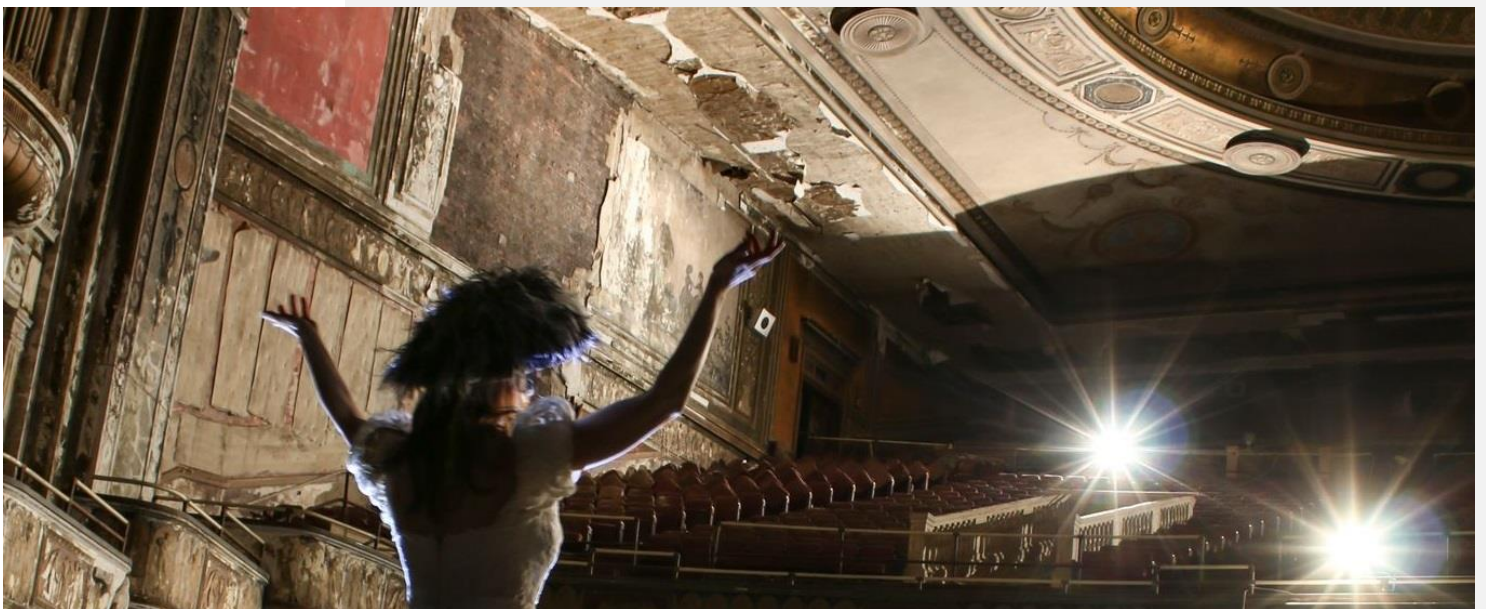


MAY 2021

# The Future from Here: Theatre Freelancers and Planning for the Future during the COVID-19 Pandemic



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# Executive Summary

*The analysis in this report is based on 397 survey responses.*

## Key Findings

Behind the emerging picture of significant job losses in the performing arts sits a complex picture of the reorganisation of theatre freelancers' livelihoods and skill-sets. This is coupled with an ambivalence about making these adaptations permanent.

There is marked pessimism about future working lives in theatre, which is exacerbated by a perceived lack of communication and support from employing organisations, and fears that the industry will not deliver economic, social, and cultural satisfaction in the future.

Respondents who have developed closer ties with other theatre freelancers over the course of the pandemic also display higher levels of optimism, and higher levels of skills development. Organised and informal peer networks have been vital sources of support for theatre freelancers.

## Conclusion

Where existing research has highlighted the exclusions from support packages faced by theatre freelancers, our interim findings illuminate the corresponding experiences of uncertainty, and pessimism about future work and the growth of inequalities. They also show a high level of adaptiveness as theatre freelancers have diversified their skills and careers. Emerging knowledge suggests a dangerous erosion of trust in the relationships between freelancers and organisations/public bodies that goes beyond the provision of livelihoods. It will take more than resources and offers of employment to rebuild these relationships. A significant finding has been to see the power and value of hope among freelancers, which is significantly enhanced through pre-existing and emerging peer and freelancer networks. While hope alone is insufficient, these results suggest it plays an important role in attitudes and responses to survival and recovery, and is enhanced within networks that have been overlooked in wider organisational and public policies.

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## Recommendations for Policy & Practice

'Fixing' the freelance workforce with 'new' skills is not the solution for post-COVID19 work and 'recovery.' Instead, policy should be built around a much more fluid and complex understanding of theatre freelancers' careers, skills base, and motivations.

Restoring the theatre sector will be about more than re-starting work and providing livelihoods. Organisations and public bodies need to build new, more collaborative, and equitable relationships with freelancers, while re-establishing trust and offering them paths to career fulfilment.

The power of freelancer networks should play a significant role and carry greater status in post-COVID theatre, arts and cultural policies and systems. Organisations are well placed to magnify this power by adopting enabling rather than managing roles.

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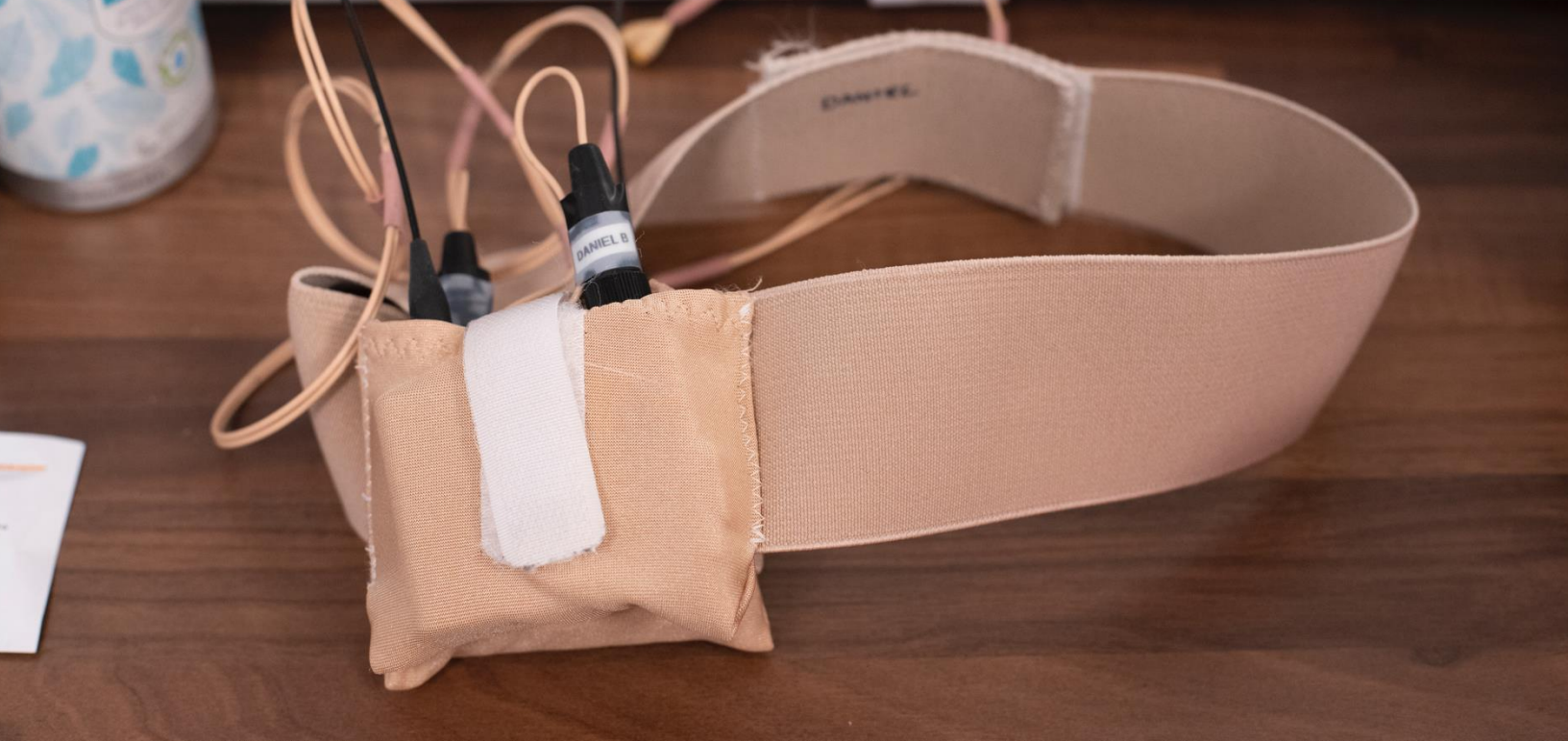
# About Freelancers in the Dark



Freelancers in the Dark is a research project investigating the social, cultural, and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on independent arts workers across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

The research project Freelancers in the Dark investigates the social, cultural, and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on independent theatre workers across the UK. Freelancers make up the bulk of the UK's theatre ecosystem, serving in a wide variety of vital roles such as writers, actors, designers, producers, technicians, sign-language interpreters, workshop facilitators, front of house staff and countless more. They form an essential body of talent for the field, with the experience and skills needed to keep the sector operating and moving forward. The effect of the social and physical restrictions put in place in March 2020 to curb the spread of the pandemic had immediate and severe effects on freelancers' lives, careers, and well-being which are likely to have long-term consequences for them and the sector as a whole. These effects played out in a social field marked by existing inequalities; inequalities which have been exacerbated by the pandemic and state and sector level responses. This project aims to document, investigate and analyse the experience of theatre freelancers across the UK during the pandemic, in order to help them and the sector develop resilience, create more effective policies and structures, and help build a more supportive, inclusive, and vital theatre for all parts of the UK.

The project is led by Dr Holly Maples at the University of Essex, in partnership with the Manchester Metropolitan University and Queen's University, Belfast. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.



## Project Timeline

	START DATE	END DATE
<b>Interviews</b>	<b>September 2020</b>	<b>April 2021</b>
<b>Surveys</b>	<b>December 2020</b>	<b>March 2021</b>
<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>March 2021</b>	<b>August 2021</b>
<b>Creative Reflection Workshops</b>	<b>July 2021</b>	<b>October 2021</b>
<b>End of Project Evaluation Events</b>	<b>January 2022</b>	
<b>Final Report Publication</b>	<b>January 2022</b>	



## Approach

Freelancers in the Dark is using a mixed-methods approach to develop a rich picture of theatre freelancers' experiences during COVID-19 informed by qualitative and quantitative data. So far, qualitative data has been gathered by interviews, survey questions, and initial focus groups. Quantitative data has been gathered through surveys.

This report focuses exclusively on data from our survey of 397 theatre freelancers which launched on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020. The survey contained 34 questions and took an average of half an hour to complete. It was designed to give us both qualitative and quantitative data points by using a range of question formats and to inform the development of further qualitative data collection. A particular focus was placed on perceived changes in theatre freelancers' careers before and after March 2020. Whilst existing surveys of this workforce and similar have focused on immediate and economic struggles since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and related health measures, our survey took a more future-oriented approach, and placed a significance on the experiences of theatre freelancers. While this sample is self-selected, it does provide important insights into the planning and long-term thinking that freelancers have engaged in since March 2020.

The survey closed on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2021, and this report features early findings. We will continue to analyse the data and integrate it with our interview and focus group data for future reports, with a view to addressing demographic gaps in our survey sample.

For the purpose of the Freelancers in the Dark project, a 'freelancer' has been defined as any individual whose work and working life exists outside of formal payrolled employment (and the restrictions and protections such contracts may offer). We have not distinguished between 'self-employed' and 'freelance' and have recognised that many 'freelancers' work in multiple roles, including part-time and short-term payroll contracts. For this reason, our guiding principle for who has been included is self-selection by the individuals.

Similarly, the study extends across all freelancers in the theatre 'sector' – those who define their role as artists and performers, technical, and support staff and those who combine work in theatre with other fields outside theatre, and within and beyond the cultural industries.



## Introduction

The pandemic and the health measures addressing it have dealt a double blow to the performing arts sector. Physical restrictions have disrupted live art forms with audiences at their core, while structural vulnerabilities in the industries which produce them have been starkly exposed. The sector relies on a workforce that is 88% self-employed or freelance (compared to a national average of 15%), and government support for those in this form of employment has been full of well-documented holes. We have already seen a contraction of the self-employed performing arts workforce since March 2020, with indications that this spikes around existing inequalities. This is the backdrop to theatre production and activity in all its forms, where lives, livelihoods, and creative practices have been highly disrupted.

This is Interim Report #1 from the research project Freelancers in the Dark. In this report, we ask how freelancers' experiences since March 2020 affected their sense of their place in the field and their expectations for their post-pandemic careers. Because the theatre sector is so dependent on its freelance workers for both its operational and artistic development, the expectations, plans and hopes of these workers are essential for any effective recovery planning or policy-making that the field or funders will do.



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To answer these questions, we turn to our survey of 397 freelancers working in UK theatre.<sup>1</sup> While this sample is self-selected, it provides important insights as to the planning and long-term thinking that freelancers have engaged in since March 2020. All quotes in this report come from the free-text response to our survey. We are keen to study COVID-19 as it is entangled with this wider social context, which compounds and complicates the pandemic experiences of freelancers.

This report looks at the future-oriented decision-making of theatre freelancers, such as undergoing training to acquire new skills, and changes in future expectations. It examines theatre freelancers' position as part of a cultural ecosystem, and demonstrates the importance of freelancers' relationships to employers, funders, and one another, both those that have developed in new and interesting ways during the last year and those pre-existing relationships that have been amplified. It also looks at how these and other factors can come together to serve as sources of hope and optimism for freelancers and the organisations with which they work. 'Hope' or optimism can be understood as a disposition towards creative work which is not defined solely by employment success, but by many factors, including the ability to derive social, civic and cultural satisfaction from a creative, imaginative, and socially engaged working life.

The report concludes with recommendations informed by our emerging findings. These recommendations may be useful for those engaged in networks and running organisations as well as public policymakers working locally, nationally, or in the devolved administrations.

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<sup>1</sup> The demographic breakdown of our respondents is as follows: 54.8% of respondents define their gender as female, 40.9% as male, and 2.3% as non-binary or other. 21.2% have caring responsibilities or dependents who rely on them. 17.6% identify as being from a socially disadvantaged background. 11.4% identify as a D/deaf or disabled person or have a long-term health condition. 73.7% of respondents were white British and 5.3% white Irish, 12.6% from other white backgrounds, 1.3% were Asian, 0.6% Black, and 3.4% of mixed/multiple ethnic backgrounds. We recognise the limited demographic coverage of this sample and are working to integrate this data with our other datasets to provide a closer analysis of inequalities and their intersections. In our final report we will provide a full breakdown of the demographic characteristics of our combined datasets.

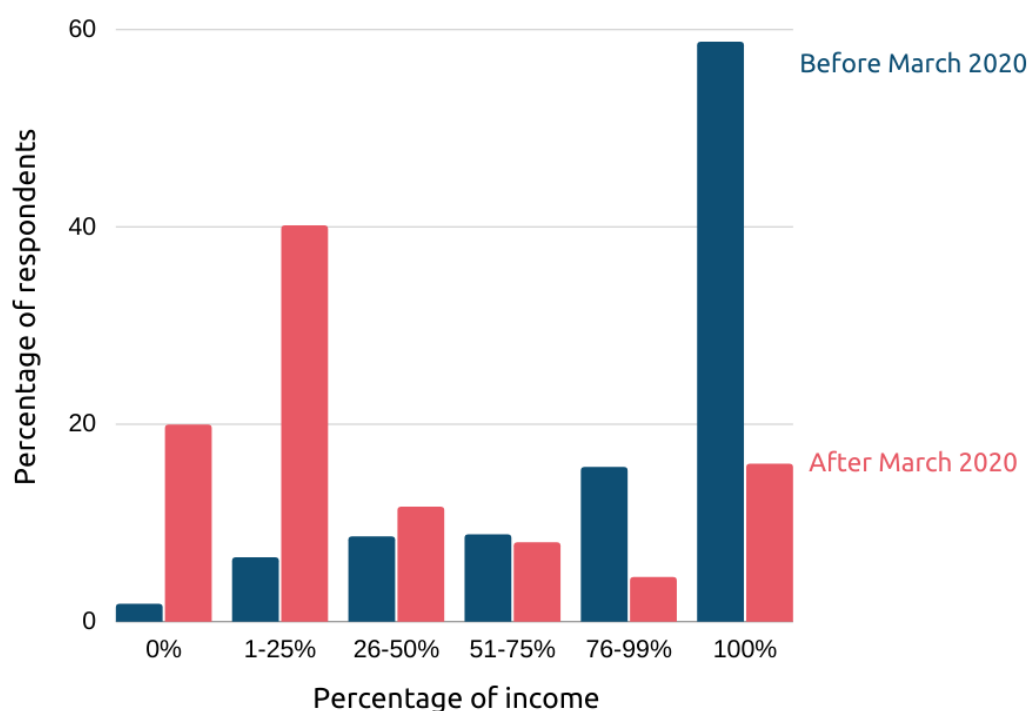
# What we Found

## Adaptations: Careers and Skills

Counter to the image of closed theatre doors, our emerging findings show that theatre freelancers are busy reorganising their working lives and developing new skills. As the theatre sector plans for its 'recovery' and re-opens in some regions, it will need to understand these changes to the field of theatre freelancers.

Behind the emerging picture of significant job losses in the performing arts sits a complex picture of the reorganisation of creative freelancers' livelihoods, which were already built on portfolio careers. As portfolio working can blur the distinction between 'leaving' and 'staying' in the theatre sector for theatre freelancers, a preliminary finding in our study is that the spread of incomes within our respondents' portfolio careers has moved *away* from theatre since March 2020. This suggests that theatre freelancers are having to reorganise their income streams to survive the immediate crisis, and that this takes them away from theatre. The agility of theatre freelancers' business models and transferability of their skill sets makes this kind of reshuffling possible, but the long-term impact of this shift remains uncertain.

Roughly, what proportion of your overall income has come from working in theatre and other arts?

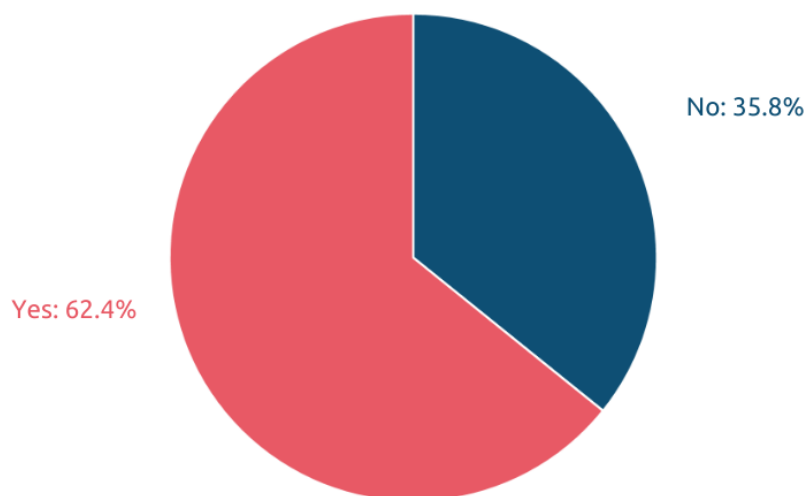


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Our respondents also report changes in their expectations about their future work. 58.7% of survey respondents have changed or completely changed their expectations about the sort of work they will do in the future, while 16.8% expect the kind of work they do be much the same. For some, these anticipated changes are large, like exiting the sector all together. Others anticipate more minor changes to their work (including more use of digital communication, discussed more below). Overwhelmingly, we see a clear commitment to returning to in-person theatrical performances, which is seen by respondents as an intrinsic part of working in theatre. There is, however, a willingness to adapt to make live theatre safe and feasible in the short- and medium-term.

*“I am a live, in-person actor: that is what I thrive on. I have no desire to have a screen between me and others.”*

Since March 2020, have you gained or developed any skills related to your freelance work in theatre and other arts?



At the same time as reshuffling their income streams and changing their expectations, our respondents have been developing their skills in the face of short- and long-term changes to the work of theatre production. 62.2% of survey respondents report having gained or developed new skills since March

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2020 in relation to their freelance work in theatre. The most reported skills gained involve using digital platforms (like Zoom) as a means of making theatre or a development of creative practices like writing that could be done in lockdown conditions. Many respondents have taken online courses including Mental Health First Aid Courses and COVID security (crowd control, health checks etc.). Others have attempted to future-proof their careers by learning audio recording skills, as TV and voiceovers are perceived as more secure sources of income. Finally, some of our respondents have developed new skills for the therapeutic benefits of the process at a time of heightened stress.

*“As I have had to refocus, my skills have developed accordingly.”*

*“I’m capable of learning anything if it means that I can continue making theatre.”*

However, our survey respondents are relatively evenly split regarding whether they intend to use the skills developed since March 2020 in their future careers (51.6% intend to, while 48.4% do not). In general, we see that where theatre freelancers do anticipate continuing to use these skills, it is in relation to the process of making theatre. Many of these adaptations are a continuation of conventions that have arisen in response to COVID-19. This includes having preparatory meetings, or auditions and castings, online. There is also an expectation that live-streaming will remain standard practice alongside live, in-person performances. These moves towards the digital are generally welcomed for their potential to remove barriers to the making and dissemination of theatre.

Our early findings show a high degree of adaptiveness displayed by theatre freelancers since March 2020, coupled with an ambivalence about making these adaptations permanent. As well as adapting to the immediate impacts of COVID-19, theatre freelancers have also been adapting their skills and careers in light of their anticipated medium- and long-term changes to the sector. This suggests that a greater attention is needed to the complex and adaptive career paths of freelancers as a significant workforce in order to understand the paths they will take into their future working lives.

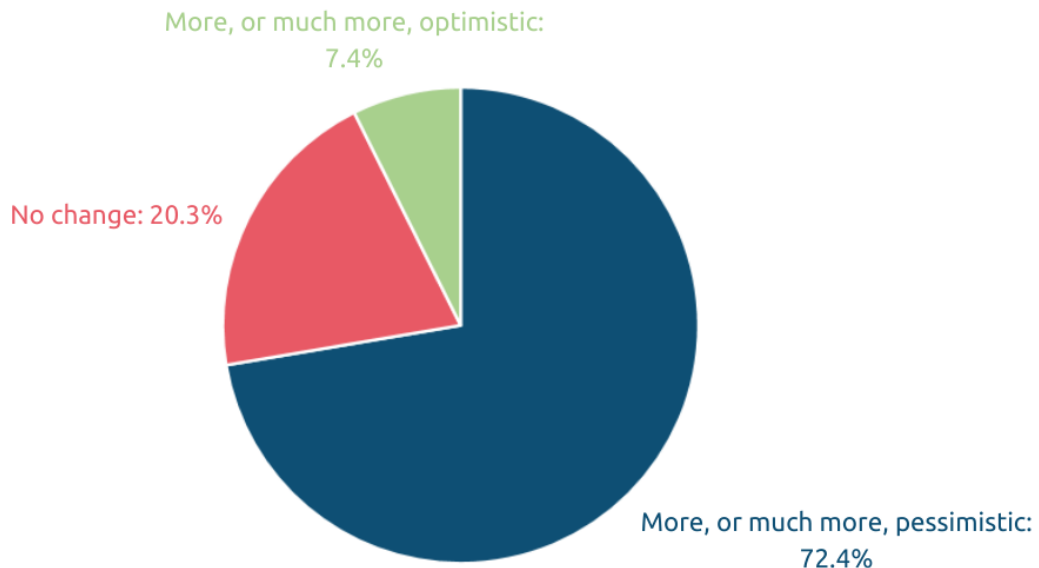
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## Concerns and Fears

Theatre freelancers have been professionally adapting to the pandemic and related health measures while also experiencing substantial personal struggles both in and outside their professional work. Our research is interested in the breadth of social, cultural, and economic experiences and circumstances which are affecting theatre freelancers' future-oriented decision making. For this reason, we have looked at our data to ask: Are theatre freelancers optimistic about what theatre can offer them in the future?

Survey respondents report experiencing high levels of pessimism. 72.4% of respondents felt more or much more pessimistic about their future as a theatre freelancer, while only 7.4% felt more or much more optimistic. Understanding the drivers of this pessimism is key to ensuring the theatre sector recovery offers theatre freelancers satisfaction or fulfilment from their work.

How have your hopes about your future work in theatre and other arts changed since March 2020?



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This pessimism often appears to be experienced as future-oriented anxiety. Our qualitative data shows many respondents feeling “worried” or “fearful” about their future in theatre. As well as those that have left the sector (by choice or by circumstance), there are many more who have struggled with uncertainty about whether to stay or leave. Qualitative data from survey respondents also made clear that experiences of uncertainty fluctuated over the course of the pandemic. This is the subjective experience of published workforce figures which show a contraction of the size of the theatre freelance workforce.

*“I have fluctuated wildly from [being] optimistic... to being sick with worry. This fluctuation happens on a daily basis.”*

*“Will I forget how to direct? Lose confidence in front of people? Be anxious in big groups?”*

Respondents also report that their fears are often deeply personal, and not limited to general sector recovery. There are many reports of increased anxieties about their own capabilities, and many report feeling isolated. Qualitative data from survey respondents also made clear that experiences of uncertainty fluctuated over the course of the pandemic, and that uncertainty was a barrier to future planning. This makes clear that the pandemic has not simply pressed pause on theatre freelancers’ careers, but it has created significant mental barriers that freelancers will be negotiating as they return to work.

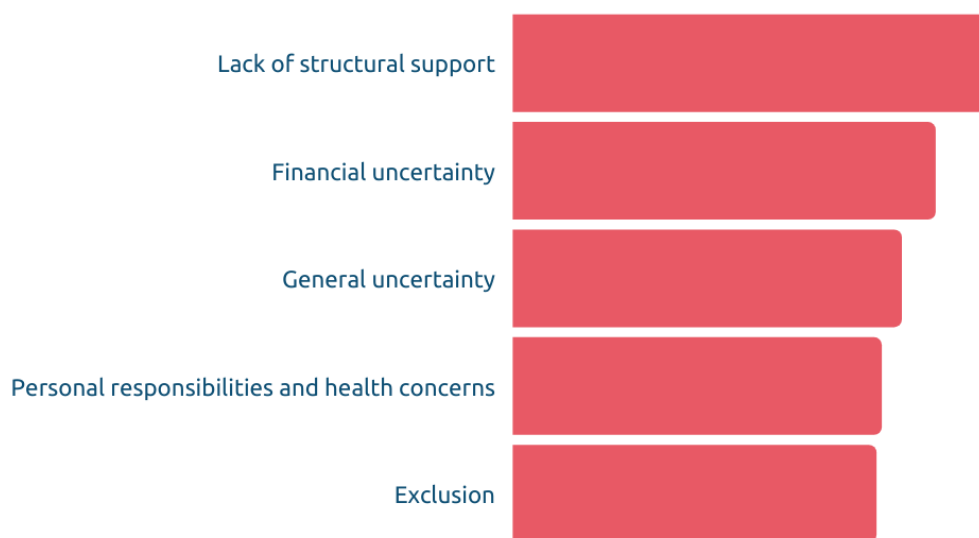
We also see concerns over the ability of theatre to offer freelancers long-term creative and civic fulfilment in the future. Respondents express concerns about the role they and their work play or wish to play in wider society. At the same time as our respondents have been feeling pessimistic about their futures in theatre, they are more likely to have increased their engagement with UK political life since March 2020 (51.5%), than to have decreased it (9.3%). Participants reported engaging in wider political and social activities, including writing to MPs, protesting, and volunteering in COVID relief initiatives. We can suggest that wider social and civic issues come to bear on what theatre freelancers want from their future work.

*“I would love to find a way to satisfy my sense of civic responsibility, it is probably the one thing that makes me question my job in theatre.”*

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Our survey echoes others which show freelancers being excluded from support packages from government and within the sector. When asked about whether they have felt supported by the organisations that are or had been their employers, 54.8% report feeling very or quite unsupported; in comparison, 18.9% report feeling very or quite supported. In addition, a lack of structural support from organisations, public bodies or the government was the largest reported barrier respondents faced in their professional lives since March 2020. This appears to be deteriorating theatre freelancers' trust in the structures that should be well placed to support them.

Since March 2020, which of the following have negatively affected the development of your work in theatre and other arts?  
(Displaying top 5 answers only)



These experiences of insufficient support have played out in freelancers' personal relationships with employers (mainly theatre companies and venues but also local authorities and public bodies). We see that a lack of communication from employers is driving freelancers to feel "disposable", "disappointed," and excluded from conversations around the future of theatres. As the relationships between freelancers and the organisations that employ them often have a "personal" character, this lack of communication often produces feelings of social rejection ("not great for self-esteem"). These employers will need to take steps to redress this for theatre freelancers to feel valued as contributors to the

*"Not seeing and working alongside fellow freelancers has inevitably meant less frequent contact with them."*

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collective pursuit of theatre-making. Crucially, this will not only require the creation of opportunities for work and payment, but also the rebuilding of trust.

The qualitative data from our survey shows fears among freelancers that the pandemic will decrease, or stall the progression of, diversity in the theatre sector. Exclusion (direct experience of, or concerns about, discrimination) ranked highly in respondents' reported barriers to developing their theatre careers since March 2020 (see graphic above). As well as barriers to accessing theatrical careers that have been heightened by the pandemic, our qualitative data shows that freelancers view a hopeful future for theatre as one in which more diverse stories are told in responsible and imaginative ways.

*"I am an older practitioner (65+) and have always struggled to be included on the grounds of age and working-class background. I think that when theatres start commissioning again, I won't get a look in! That's my fear anyway."*

Understanding the drivers behind theatre freelancers' future-oriented decision-making is vital to the reopening and reimagining of the theatre sector at large. Central to this is the relationships between theatre freelancers and their employers, and the long-term creative and civic fulfilment that working in theatre can afford. Restoring the sector requires more than resources; it requires the rebuilding of trust, and of hope.



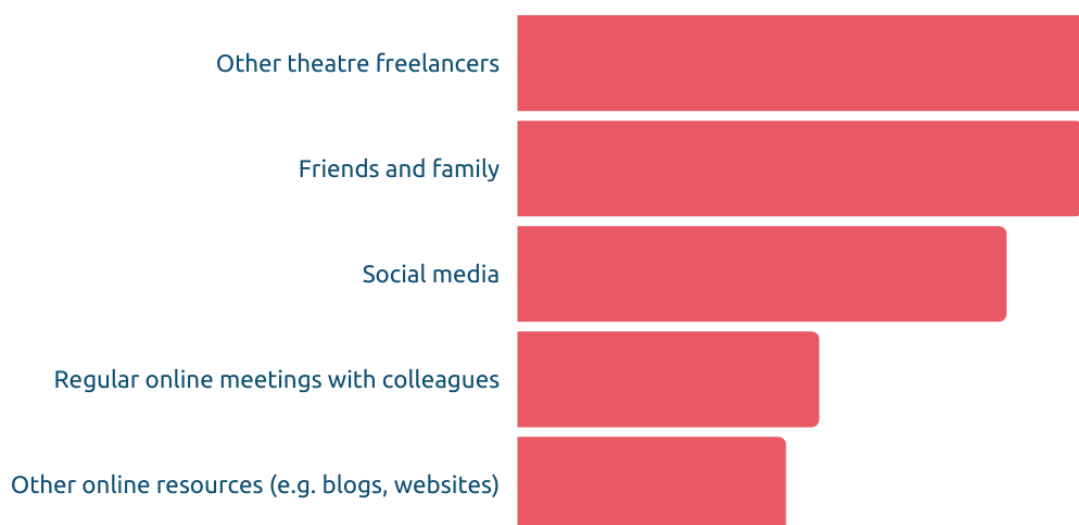
## Sources of Optimism

Despite the high levels of pessimism displayed in our survey, we are interested in the moments of optimism reported by our respondents. We have explored this by looking for significant correlations between increased levels of reported optimism and other factors. This analysis allows us to suggest that there are some sources of optimism that theatre freelancers have drawn on since March 2020, which could play a vital role in rebuilding the sector.

We see a positive correlation between those who report feeling closer to other theatre freelancers and higher levels of optimism, and this relationship is statistically significant. What's more, when asked "where have you turned to for non-financial support as a theatre freelancer?" the most commonly selected answer was "other freelancers in theatre and the other arts." This outstripped even "friends and family." We can therefore suggest that peer-to-peer support has been vital and meaningful for theatre freelancers during the pandemic.

*"I've found that talking to people in the same boat, and different ones, has been beneficial for me in terms of keeping it together, and weathering the worst of it all."*

Since March 2020, where have you turned to for non-financial support as a freelancer in theatre and other arts?  
(Displaying top 5 answers only)



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We also see many informal acts of solidarity amongst the workforce. These include practical forms of support such as “creating paid work opportunities” and mentoring. Theatre freelancers also reported many acts of interpersonal care, from “informal chats,” to “going for a walk with a colleague,” to “emotional support” and “phoning people to try to make sure they're OK.” These social bonds appear to have stepped into the gap left by a lack of communication, and a perceived lack of care, from theatre organisations and public bodies.

*“I have been chatting to friends who have been suffering from hopelessness and trying to keep them going.”*

*“My activism for costume workers has kept me connected to other workers.”*

There have also been many formal acts of solidarity amongst the workforce. Since March 2020 there has been a mobilisation of groups of theatre freelancers like Freelancers Make Theatre Work, Freelancers Taskforce, and others. These have developed platforms, outside of the traditional union model, for theatre freelancers to advocate, skill share, and provide mutual support. As well as those who have engaged directly with these groups, many of our participants report keeping up with their activity online. What’s more, engaging in a peer network resulted in an increase in reported optimism; comparatively, engaging in a trade union did not result in higher (or lower) feelings of optimism. However, these new forms of organisations threw up new frictions, including inequalities in who felt able to participate or be vocal in these new social groupings.

In terms of skills development, we see a positive correlation between feeling closer to other freelancers and developing new skills. Our qualitative data suggests this is due to peer-to-peer skill-sharing. This suggests that the bonds between theatre freelancers are not only of social benefit, but also play an important role in growing professional development and adaptiveness, and expanding or increasing the skills base of the theatre freelancer workforce.

*“I’ve been offering online dance classes, with several free spots for unemployed dancers.”*

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Although we have reported that our respondents feel widely unsupported by the organisations that are, or have been, their employers, some of these employers appear to be serving other purposes. We observe a significant correlation between freelancers who feel supported by their employers, and those who feel closer to other freelancers. This suggests that good relationships between individual freelancers and employing organisations improves the general fortitude of the theatre freelance workforce.

While this is an aspect we will be scrutinising more closely in the coming months, we see an important role of theatre organisations (companies and venues) as hubs for wider formal and informal freelancer networks, contributing to positive and therefore more robust professional communities within different locales and as part of regional recovery.

From these emerging findings we can suggest strengthened support networks both horizontally and vertically in the sector—freelancers and their peers, as well as between freelancers and their employers—are important if not vital for sector recovery. It is becoming clear that greater optimism and hope for the future of theatre and creative work can be realised by greater attention to the powerful informal peer networks of freelancers.



## Recommendations for Policy & Practice

These are preliminary findings from our survey and richer observations will come as we dig deeper into the data and gather more knowledge from other aspects of the project (focus groups, interviews). However, we think there are already clear conclusions and recommendations we can draw out.

Since March 2020, theatre freelancers have further diversified their skills and careers for both professional and personal reasons. There are positive and negative aspects to this skills diversification. However, despite the ready adaptability of this workforce, there are real concerns and pessimism about how the pandemic has impacted the sector, and the resulting short-term and long-term changes to freelance working lives. These concerns include ongoing uncertainty and lack of support (noted below), concerns about loss of opportunity and personal capabilities, magnification of inequalities, and fears that the career path will not lead to the wider civic fulfilment they seek as part of their wider career satisfaction. **This would suggest 'fixing' the freelance workforce with 'new' skills is not the solution for post-COVID19 work and 'recovery.'** Instead, policy should be built around a much more fluid and complex understanding of theatre freelancers' careers, skills base, and motivations.

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The survey responses suggest that theatre freelancers' experiences since March 2020 have produced feelings of uncertainty, pessimism, and isolation. This appears to be inhibiting their ability or willingness to plan for a future in the sector. This destabilisation has been amplified by a real loss of trust and communication between freelancers and the organisations who had been their past champions, employers, or supporters. Restoring those relationships will be about more than switching the lights on and hiring freelancers again. At the same time, theatre freelancers are articulating motivations to contribute to social and civic recovery and see this as part of their future career fulfilment. **Organisations and public bodies need to build new, more collaborative, and equitable relationships with freelancers, while re-establishing trust and offering them paths to career fulfilment.**

By contrast, we also see in this survey that optimism, hope, and skills development are significantly enhanced by peer support and the informal networks freelancers have established for themselves. Many are enhancements of pre-COVID19 networks, but they are more mobilised, visible, and proactive than before. Some organisations have played a role as 'hubs' for these networks, supporting rather than leading them, with positive consequences for the freelancer community around them. **These findings suggest that the power of these freelancer networks should play a significant role and carry greater status in post-COVID theatre, arts and cultural policies and systems. Organisations are well placed to magnify this power by adopting enabling rather than managing roles.**

# FREELANCERS IN THE DARK

Freelancers in the Dark is the public name of the project, 'The Economic, Social, and Cultural Impact of COVID-19 on Independent Art Workers in UK Theatre'. This project has been funded by the ESRC through their emergency funding for projects addressing COVID-19. The project is based at University of Essex, East 15 School of Acting and is a collaboration between University of Essex, Manchester Metropolitan University and Queen's University Belfast.

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Thank you to Nina Dunn and the Dark Theatres project for the images used in the report, and to Marek Jagoda for our main project image.

If you would like to request a copy of this report or the information in it in an accessible format please contact [IAWsCOVID-19@essex.ac.uk](mailto:IAWsCOVID-19@essex.ac.uk).

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