



Essex Business School Centre for Work,  
Organization and Society/British Academy

**PERFORMING DURING/AFTER LOCKDOWN:  
A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LIVE  
PERFORMERS IN THE UK**



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On 16<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the UK government announced that live performance venues would close with immediate effect in preparation for a nationwide lockdown. The period since has highlighted both the value and vulnerability of the UK's creative workforce. Growing concerns have been raised for some years about the closure of live performance (especially music) venues throughout the UK. The lockdown and social distancing measures brought about as a result of the spread of COVID-19 dramatically accentuated these concerns; in this sense the

pandemic might be thought of as 'a crisis within a crisis' in/for live performance.

The effect of social distancing and lockdown measures on the live performance industry has been acute, bringing about an immediate threat to the livelihoods of performers, many of whose working lives were already financially precarious. Almost overnight, it threw into jeopardy the feasibility of venues and whole sectors of the industry.

The long-term impact is of course, still largely uncertain, but available data and commentaries indicate that live performance work is no longer available for many actors, singers, musicians and other performers, that many venues will not re-open or be sustainable in the long run, and that whole sectors of the performance industry, notably those which are least able to access public sector or commercial funding streams, may disappear altogether, or at least cease to exist in the creative forms in which they have in the past.

Coupled with this, concerns have been raised, particularly by professional bodies, about the impact of COVID on a social justice agenda and on support infrastructures for those working in no/low pay contexts; again, a well-documented feature of the 'gig economy' pre-COVID, but which the latter has had a substantial and, most likely, long-term impact on. The extent to which COVID has accentuated the insecurity of venues and performers that were already struggling has led Equity (2021) to refer to COVID as a 'pandemic of precarity across the creative sectors'<sup>1</sup>, reporting that more than one in five of its members have taken on or added to their personal debt since March 2020. At the same time, more than 40% of Equity members were unable to access the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.equity.org.uk/theshowcantgoon>

The survey findings reported here are part of a wider study that aims to understand the impact of lockdown, and of other social distancing measures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, on the working lives of self-employed performers<sup>2</sup>, considering financial concerns, but also a wider range of issues, including some of the ways in which performers might have adapted their work in response to the pandemic. It also identifies the type of support they and the industry might need in order to recover from the ongoing effects of the pandemic in the longer-term.

Between October and December 2020, 210 UK-based performers took part in an online survey that was designed to provide an overview of their experiences and responses to the technical, artistic and personal challenges presented by the pandemic. Calls for participation were circulated via social media, and through partner organizations including Equity and the Musicians' Union. The survey included a mix of quantifiable attitudinal questions, and open questions inviting free text responses. The volume of data in response to the latter amounted to just over 18,000 words. Of the 210 survey participants, 72% (130) confirmed their willingness to undertake a follow up interview.

## KEY FINDINGS

### The impact of COVID on live performance opportunities and earnings:

- 99% of participants said that opportunities to perform in front of a live audience had been entirely/largely reduced by COVID.
- 76% said that their earnings from performance work were their primary source of income.

- For 94% of participants, lockdown/distancing had resulted, entirely or largely, in a loss of this income.
- 48% of participants had considered, or had undertaken, an additional form of paid work due to the loss of this income.
- 67% reported entirely or largely needing to access financial support from the government or other organizations during the pandemic. Of those, over 30% reported being 'not at all' successful in accessing such support.
- 82% of participants felt that lockdown/social distancing had negatively impacted on their profile as performers, and on their relationship with their audience.

### Adapting live performance using online media during COVID and beyond:

- A slight majority of participants – 51% had not adapted their performances to online media such as streaming, YouTube videos etc. Of those who had undertaken using online media, only 3 participants (3%) were not satisfied with their online performances.
- 80% of those who had performed online during the pandemic considered audience feedback on those performances to be extremely, very or moderately important, and 91% believed that their online performances had been successful in entertaining their audiences.
- Only 10% of performers who had used an online payment system such as a virtual tip jar or who had charged for online performances felt that this had been successful. The majority, 51%

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<sup>2</sup> Defined here as someone who 'acts, sings, delivers, plays in, or otherwise performs a literary, dramatic or musical work'.

reported that it was ‘not at all’ successful.

- 84% of participants expected that opportunities to undertake face-to-face performances in the longer term would be entirely, largely or moderately reduced as a result of COVID.
- Of those who had performed online, 64% expected to continue to deliver some or all of their work via online media once social distancing rules ended, and live performance venues re-opened.

### DEMOGRAPHICS IN DETAIL

Our ‘typical’ survey respondent was aged 40-49, white/white British, based in London or the South East of England, and worked as an actor, singer, musician or some other type of performer.

**Table 1.1 Participants’ age range**

Age range	%	n.
18-29	8.57%	18
30-39	18.57%	39
40-49	26.19%	55
50-59	19.52%	41
60 – 69	15.24%	32
70 – 79	8.10%	17
70+	3.81%	8
Total	100%	210

**Table 1.2 Participants’ gender identification**

Gender identification	%	n.
Female	50.95%	107
Male	47.62%	100
Transgender female	0.00%	0
Transgender male	0.00%	0
Non-binary/gender fluid	1.43%	3
Prefer not to answer	0.00%	0
Total	100%	210

**Table 1.3 Participants’ racial/ethnic identification**

Racial/ethnic identification	%	n.
White/White British	88.57%	186
Black/Black British	0.95%	2
Asian/Asian British	0.48%	1
Mixed race	2.38%	5
Prefer not to answer	1.90%	4
Other	5.71%	12
Total	100%	210

**Table 1.4 Participants' regional location**

Regional location	%	n.
East of England	5.74%	12
East Midlands	4.78%	10
London	37.80%	79
North West	5.74%	12
Northern Ireland	2.87%	6
Scotland	4.31%	9
South East	17.22%	36
South West	7.66%	16
Wales	1.91%	4
West Midlands	5.26%	11
Yorkshire and the Humber	5.74%	12
Prefer not to answer	0.96%	2
Total	100%	209

Participants identified a broad range of performance roles in which they worked<sup>3</sup>, with the majority (56%, n. = 175) working as actors

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<sup>3</sup> Participants were provided with a list and asked to select all that applied to them hence the total (312) is more than the total number of participants (210).

<sup>4</sup> Other roles were: After dinner speaker, agent's assistant, body artist, burlesque performer, burlesque producer, cabaret artiste, character entertainer, children's entertainer, circus performer, circus skills teacher, community art

and/or singers. 19% (n. = 58) listed other performance roles.

**Table 1.5 Type of performance work undertaken**

Type of performance roles undertaken	%	n.
Actor	39.74%	124
Singer	16.35%	51
Dancer	5.45%	17
Musician	7.05%	22
Comedian	5.45%	17
Performance Artist	7.37%	23
Other <sup>4</sup>	18.59%	58
Total	100%	312

## FINDINGS IN DETAIL

When asked about the extent to which lockdown/social distancing had reduced opportunities to perform in front of a live audience, 98.5% of participants said that such opportunities had been entirely/largely reduced. Less than 2% said that such opportunities had been only slightly or moderated reduced.

director and facilitator, composer, dance teacher, designer, director, face painter, family entertainer, fight director, impresario, juggler, literary presenter, magician, musical theatre performer, producer, puppeteer, stage director, stage manager, street entertainer, storyteller, theatre audio describer, variety performer, voice actor, writer.

**Table 2.1. Impact of lockdown/social distancing on live performance opportunities**

Extent to which lockdown/social distancing has reduced opportunities to perform in front of a live audience	%	n.
Entirely	76.08%	159
Largely	22.49%	47
Moderately	0.48%	1
Slightly	0.96%	2
Not at All	0.00%	0
Total	100%	209

For the majority of participants – 76% (n. = 159), their earnings from performance work were entirely or largely their primary source of income.

**Table 2.2 Earnings from performance work as participants' primary source of income**

Extent to which earnings from performance work are the primary source of income	%	n.
Entirely	40.95%	86
Largely	34.76%	73
Moderately	17.14%	36
Slightly	5.71%	12
Not at All	1.43%	3
Total	100%	210

For the large majority, 94% (n. = 197), lockdown/distancing had resulted, entirely or largely, in a loss of this income.

**Table 2.3 Extent to which lockdown/distancing has resulted in a loss of income from performance work**

Extent to which lockdown/distancing has resulted in a loss of income from performance work	%	n.
Entirely	58.10%	122
Largely	35.71%	75
Moderately	3.81%	8
Slightly	1.90%	4
Not at All	0.48%	1
Total	100%	210

Just under half, 48% of participants (n. = 96) had considered, or had undertaken, an additional form of paid work due to the loss of this income. 22% answered 'not at all', and this is a finding that needs to be explored in more depth in follow-up interviews.

**Table 2.4 Extent to which participants had considered or undertaken an additional form of paid work due to the loss of income resulting from COVID.**

Extent to which participants had considered or undertaken an additional form of paid work due to the loss of income resulting from COVID	%	n.
Entirely	21.11%	42
Largely	27.14%	54
Moderately	15.08%	30
Slightly	14.57%	29
Not at all	22.11%	44
Total	100%	199

67% (n. = 140) of participants reported entirely or largely needing to access financial support from the government or other organizations during the pandemic.

**Table 2.5 Extent to which participants needed to access financial support from the government or other organizations during the pandemic**

Extent to which participants needed to access financial support from the government or other organizations during the pandemic	%	n.
Entirely	34.93%	73
Largely	32.06%	67
Moderately	12.92%	27
Slightly	2.87%	6
Not at All	17.22%	36
Total	100%	209

Of those, over 30% (n. = 63) reported being 'not at all' successful in accessing financial support from the UK government or other organizations during pandemic. The majority (61%, n. = 126) reported being entirely, largely or moderately successful, however.

**Table 2.6 Extent to which participants (who needed to) had been successful in accessing financial support from the UK government or other organizations during the pandemic**

Extent to which participants (who needed to) had been successful in accessing financial support from the UK government or other organizations during the pandemic	%	n.
Entirely	24.76%	51
Largely	21.36%	44
Moderately	15.05%	31
Slightly	8.25%	17
Not at All	30.58%	63
Total	100%	206

A large majority of participants – 82% (n. = 169) felt that lockdown/social distancing had negatively impacted on their profile as performers, and on their relationship with their audience.

**Table 2.7 Extent to which participants thought lockdown/social distancing had negatively impacted on their profile/relationship with their audience**

Extent to which participants thought lockdown/social distancing had negatively impacted on their profile/relationship with their audience	%	n.
Entirely	42.51%	88
Largely	39.13%	81
Moderately	9.18%	19
Slightly	6.28%	13
Not at All	2.90%	6
Total	100%	207

A slight majority of participants – 51% (n. = 107) had not adapted their performances to online media through live streaming, YouTube videos etc.

**Table 2.8 Adaptations to online media (e.g., streaming, YouTube)**

Adaptations to online media	%	n.
Yes	48.80%	102
No	51.20%	107
Total	100%	209

Of those who had made adaptations, only 3 participants (3%) were ‘not at all’ satisfied with them.

**Table 2.9 Level of satisfaction with adaptations to online media (e.g. streaming, YouTube)**

Level of satisfaction with adaptations (e.g., to online performances)	%	n.
Extremely	5.10%	5
Very	23.47%	23
Moderately	55.10%	54
Slightly	13.27%	13
Not at All	3.06%	3
Total	100%	98

However, a number of significant challenges associated with performing online were identified.

### **Challenges associated with performing online**

Not surprisingly, the primary challenge faced by those who had performed online was a sense of isolation and the loss of meaningful interaction with an audience. Chat functions or message boards were considered a poor substitute for the immersive experience and atmosphere of a live venue. The lack of engagement and energy were

associated with the ‘inorganic’ nature of the medium, with the experience being described as ‘muted’:

The biggest thing is not being able to see, hear and engage with an online audience. Even though people can leave comments etc. you can’t judge their true reaction the way you would with a live audience where you can ‘read the room’ (Bob Robbins, male, 50-59, actor/singer/dancer/musician).

Missing the audience being in the room - the energy and shared atmosphere (Bunty Havers, female, 40-49, actor).

Dealing with the inorganic nature of the medium and the overall “mutedness” of it (Pierre Grant, male, 40-49, actor).

It is not only the lack of proximity to an audience that performers found difficult, however, but also, for those who normally work interactively, the inability to engage in immersive interaction with fellow performers. Being unable to ‘look your fellow performers in the eye and react accordingly’, or ‘read the other performers’ (Wendy Crook, female, 60-69, actor) was identified as a significant challenge. As one respondent put it, ‘acting is reacting and that is difficult on Zoom’ (Rachel Lowe, female, 60-69, actor).

A general sense of loneliness, isolation, lack of motivation and, for some, concerns over their mental health were widely reported: ‘the main personal challenge has been keeping motivation up and trying not to sink into a pit of despair when it feels like there will never be real gigs again’ (Will Taylor, male, 40-49, singer/musician). Others reported a general ‘fear of the unknown’ and sense of ‘dread’ (Linda Luckman, female, 40-49, actor/singer), describing working online as like being in an ‘invisible cell’.

Such existential concerns are compounded by a significant reduction or even a total lack of

income and financial stability. As noted, 30% of respondents reported being unable to access relevant support schemes such as the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) (see Table 2.6, above); often this was due to relatively small amounts of income being raised by other jobs during the eligibility period. One respondent summed things up when she said: 'I survived on my low paid part time accounts job and also a few lucky acting roles. And one payment from universal credit. A few family members sent me food' (Tina Little, female, 40-49, actor).

For some, performing online had resulted in some improvement in their financial situation. However, amongst those who had used an online payment system, such as a virtual tip jar, or who had charged for online events, only 10% of participants (n. = 8) felt that this had been 'extremely or very' successful, with 24% (n. = 19) believing it to have been 'moderately' so, and the majority – 51% (n. = 41) reporting that it was 'not at all' successful.

**Table 2.10 Perceived success of online payment systems**

Perceived success of online payment systems	%	n.
Extremely	1.25%	1
Very	8.75%	7
Moderately	23.75%	19
Slightly	15.00%	12
Not at All	51.25%	41
Total	100%	80

Some respondents were fairly positive about the range of platforms available and the ease with which a virtual payment system could be set up:

There are more platforms to share and perform on than I expected, and it's increasingly easy to add tip jars etc. I haven't actually done that myself; all my online shows have been paid bookings, but I think for busking type shows there are good opportunities (Tracie Kingsman, female, 18-29, performance artist).

Many reported that doing so had simply accentuated their sense of anxiety and financial precarity, however: 'not having a sense in advance of whether anyone will definitely log in to watch, or if we will make enough money to justify the time put into the preparation and performance is hard' (Richard Mears, male, 40-49, musician). Technical challenges further accentuated this.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, another difficulty that performers had faced when attempting to deliver online content was the unreliability, or in some cases complete absence of sufficiently robust domestic internet connections. Often this manifests itself in terms of lag, stuttering or, more seriously, a break in connection mid-performance which can often result in viewers failing to return to not only that, but future performances.

This in itself, however, assumes that the majority of performers are already sufficiently conversant in the requisite technical skills to present a sufficiently professional online performance or, for that matter, have the necessary financial resources to invest in appropriate equipment; something that our survey suggests is not at all the case. Respondents' comments highlight concerns about technical skill sets: 'there are technical issues that are beyond my skill set' (Gregg Mason, male, 40-49, actor/comedian), 'I am not a sound engineer specialist; I am a soprano' (Tracy Ainsworth, female, 50-59, singer), as well viability of investing in necessary resources: 'I haven't got the budget for high quality equipment' (Diana Styles, female, 40-49, children's entertainer), and 'I don't have a professional set up at home and it's not

financially viable for me to buy professional equipment' (Lucy Ely, female, 18-29, children's entertainer/comedian).

Equally, the spatial restrictions of performing at home - both physical and experiential - are a major challenge for many performers, undermining both the quality of their performance work, as well as potentially that of their familial relationships. As one respondent put it: 'Living in a small apartment with little open space and bad lighting does not lend itself to online performance' (Tracie Kingsman, female, 18-29, performance artist). Another summed up the 'improvisational' challenges faced by many performers, when he said:

Trying to make the "magic" happen when all you have is a bench, some flowers in pots and the front door of your shed outside or a "spaceship console" made from gaffa tape, perspex and a digital clock as a backdrop indoors!' (Ian Lamb, male, 50-59, actor/singer/performance artist).

Parenting and caring responsibilities were also at the forefront of performers' minds: 'I am a mother, and my children are at the front of my mind all the time, not being able to detach from home makes me inhibited!' (Tracy Ainsworth, female, 50-59, singer).

When asked how important they considered online feedback to be in judging the quality of their online performances, only 8.25% (n. = 8) considered such feedback to be 'not at all' important, with 80% (n. = 78) considering such feedback to be extremely, very or moderately important. The importance attributed to audience feedback, especially in the context of the existential, financial and practical concerns raised above, arguably render performers particularly vulnerable to the effects of negative feedback and further research is needed to explore this issue in more depth.

**Table 2.11 Perceived importance of feedback to online performances**

Perceived importance of online feedback	%	n.
Extremely	10.31%	10
Very	35.05%	34
Moderately	35.05%	34
Slightly	11.34%	11
Not at All	8.25%	8
Total	100%	97

**Opportunities associated with performing online**

91% of participants (n. = 90) believed that online performances had been 'extremely, very or moderately' successful in entertaining an audience.

**Table 2.12 Perceived level of success in entertaining an audience online**

Perceived level of success in entertaining an audience online	%	n.
Extremely	14.14%	14
Very	34.34%	34
Moderately	42.42%	42
Slightly	6.06%	6
Not at All	3.03%	3
Total	100%	99

As well as the potential financial opportunities referred to above, online performers were relatively positive about the opportunities for inclusivity, accessibility and sustainability, noting possibilities for enhanced reach across more geographically dispersed and diverse audiences. Some had been able to create a 'community of fans around the world' during lockdown, noting the possibility of building and sustaining a potential future income base for when face-to-face performance resumes:

Live streaming has enabled me to perform for audiences across the world who perhaps would not have had a chance to see me live. This has potentially opened/increased opportunities for international bookings when live performances are able to resume (Will Taylor, male, 40-49, singer/musician).

I've had promoters from overseas in my audiences - I'd never have been able to access US and Canadian promoters ... before. The hope is that this could lead to something live once international travel and live comedy starts up (Jane Tompkins, female, 30-39, comedian).

The (inadvertent) creation of a community of fans around the world who are interested in my work and who regularly tune in. Thus, raising my profile, potential income base (CD sales and merchandise) and hopefully a larger potential audience for public gigs when the pandemic is over (Mark Godiva, male, 30-39, musician).

Being able to work in a familiar domestic environment and not having the costs or time associated with traveling to a physical place was also identified as a practical benefit associated with performing live from home. As one participant said: 'I can perform in my pyjamas. I shot an advert from my bedroom' (Tina Little, female, 40-49, actor).

As well as these practical advantages, some performers expressed enthusiasm for the artistic and creative opportunities, including 'branching out' across genres and styles, that they felt had arisen from adapting to a new environment and performance medium:

Artistically, we have branched out and explored music and themes we would not have been booked for ... we have branched into cabaret, musicals, themed shows etc. which has allowed us to explore and take risks (Felicity Lions, female, 40-49, singer/comedian).

For some performers, being freed from some of the regular demands of work, combined with a need to update their performance materials more regularly (e.g., to accommodate repeat audiences and requests), alongside the creative affordances provided by the medium itself, has injected their work not only with a new vitality; it has also reinvigorated their enthusiasm for performance: '[I've] been able to experiment with new ideas and techniques because I've had time that would otherwise have been used for admin and travel' (Gregg Mason, male, 40-49, actor/comedian). For some, this had been a creative and productive period of artistic self-affirmation: 'Using my imagination and creativity again. Realizing a project I had shelved. Recovering my self-belief' (Simon Cook, male, 50-59, actor).

For some performers, this had simply been a period in which to develop new skills, particularly in respect on the technical side of their work (e.g., in video editing, lighting, production) which they felt would 'come in useful after the pandemic' (Gregg Mason, male, 40-49, actor/comedian). One participant summed this up:

I feel like my technical knowledge and ability have improved substantially. I definitely feel more confident with live audio and video set-ups and live production and have been able to apply

this in various contexts (Will Taylor, male, 40-49, singer/musician).

**The future of live performance: ‘It’s time for a re-think’**

84% of participants (n. = 91) anticipated the pandemic reducing opportunities to undertake face-to-face performances (entirely, largely or moderately) in the longer term.

**Table 2.13 Expectation that COVID will reduce opportunities to undertake face-to-face performances in the longer term**

Expectation that COVID will reduce opportunities to undertake face-to-face performances in the longer term	%	n.
Entirely	10.31%	10
Largely	65.98%	64
Moderately	17.53%	17
Slightly	5.15%	5
Not at All	1.03%	1
Total	100%	97

Of those who had performed online, 64% (n. = 62) expected to continue to deliver some or all of their work via on- social distancing rules ended, and live performance venues re-opened.

**Table 2.14 Expectation of continuing to perform online post-COVID**

Expectation of continuing to perform online post-COVID	%	n.
Entirely	3.09%	3
Largely	21.65%	21
Moderately	39.18%	38
Slightly	24.74%	24
Not at All	11.34%	11
Total	100%	97

In response to questions about the type of support that self-employed performers and the live performance industry are likely to need in order to recover from the ongoing effects of the pandemic in the longer-term, respondent identified five key issues.

First, almost all respondents referred to the **income support/supplements** needed to mitigate against the ongoing financial impact of the pandemic, in particular the extension of the SEISS and access to Universal Credit. For some, the expectation is that it will be at least 2023 until ‘regular work is back to previous levels’ (Charlie George, male, 30-39, actor/circus performer); for others, ‘continued support from Universal Credit and the SEISS is needed because normal working in the entertainment industry is not likely to recover’ (Will Sewell, male, 50-59, actor/performance artist).

Second, **travel/subsistence funding schemes** are needed in order to make travelling to a smaller number of gigs financially viable:

[What I will need is] some form of continued SEISS grant to fill the ongoing shortfall in bookings, and to enable me to meet the expenses of travelling to a region for just one or two gigs, where

previously I could count on four or five in the same region, obviously making the trip more economically viable (Charlie Clipper, male, 50-59, actor/storyteller).

Third, performers felt that funding is vital to support individual performers in the short-medium term, as well as **grass-roots business support schemes** to sustain the small/independent venues on which they rely 'whilst audience confidence builds' (Mitch Crocker, male, 40-49, actor).

Fourth, many performers felt that in order to credibly address not only the current, but future challenges posed by the pandemic, what is required is the introduction of some form of **Universal Basic Income for creative workers**, particularly in the context of Brexit:

I believe that universal income for all citizens would solve a lot of problems. For the arts in general, more grants and mentoring for new work and support to tour outside of the UK after Brexit (Lulu Cairns, female, 50-59, performance artist).

Finally, additional suggestions focused on a more **systemic review of the funding of arts and creative work in the UK** and the protection of artists in the post pandemic market. Part of this review, many respondents emphasized, should involve an evaluation of differential access to live streaming opportunities, and a review of possible subsidies to support access, equipment and skills development. One respondent summed up the views of many: 'it's time for a complete re-think of the way performance is funded, and indeed the way performance is brought to an audience (William Frank, male, 60-69, actor/puppeteer). Performers feel strongly that this review should encompass the financial, technical and experiential infrastructure of live performance, as well as practical support and legal protection, with concerns being raised about the potentially 'catastrophic' impact of the

pandemic on working relationships and conditions:

I feel in need of practical support in establishing relationships with organisations and companies who will look to make work in whatever the current conditions are. The organisations and companies who I have had ongoing or recent connections with as a freelancer have largely suspended work and communications with me during this period which for a couple of months felt navigable but coming up to a year since I last performed without any whispers of things starting up again feels catastrophic ... I am wary of being exploited financially at this time on the basis that everyone wants work - already in terms of teaching roles, I have encountered being asked to accept an hourly rate that I received 10 years ago when I first graduated (Wyona Ellis, female, 30-39, dancer).

## Summary

Many performers reported experiencing lockdown as an opportunity to develop creative, artistic and technical skills, to build a global audience base, to combine work and home more seamlessly, to identify ways of working that are potentially more accessible, inclusive and sustainable. Others, however, raised serious concerns about the immediate and long-term impact of the pandemic on their working lives as self-employed performers in the UK, and on the industry more generally. Perhaps not surprisingly, the loss of proximity to an audience, and of opportunities to connect in an immersive and interactive way with fellow performers has resulted in significant artistic challenges; practical and skills-based limitations have constrained the possibilities attached to performing online, and of most concern, the financial implications of COVID have been identified as nothing short of potentially

‘catastrophic’. Five key issues have been identified as necessary to a sustainable future, post-COVID, for self-employed performers and for the live performance industry.

#### Recommendations

- 1) In the immediate term, the **extension of the SEISS and access to Universal Credit** for self-employed performers.
- 2) **Travel/subsistence funding schemes** in order to make travelling to a smaller number of live events financially viable once venues re-open.
- 3) **Grass-roots business support schemes** to sustain the small/independent venues on which self-employed performers rely while audiences rebuild confidence.
- 4) The introduction of a **Universal Basic Income for creative workers** to sustain post-COVID recovery.
- 5) A **systemic review of the funding of arts and creative work in the UK**, including an evaluation of differential access to live streaming opportunities (e.g., reliable internet access), and a review of possible subsidies to support access, equipment and skills development, as well as practical support and legal protection against regressive working conditions.

These recommendations reflect Equity’s (2021)<sup>5</sup> call for a Basic Income guarantee for creative workers in the UK, based on the provision of a simple, universal payment to all creative workers each month - whether or not they’re working, during and after the pandemic. Such a scheme

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<sup>5</sup> Equity’s main concern is for a fair and dignified return to work, hence its launch of the Basic Income for Creative Workers campaign: <https://www.equity.org.uk/news/2020/december/equity-demands-basic-income-guarantee-for-creative-workers/>

would offer creative workers, including performers, a degree of financial stability, enabling them to remain in the sector ensuring that they are free to take on work when it arises without fear of losing other forms of financial support and protection. It would also help to mitigate against some of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on performers and other creative workers from backgrounds which are already under-represented in the industry, helping to ensure that they are not forced out of performance work, and that new entrants to the profession are not deterred, potentially offsetting growing concerns about the regressive impact of the pandemic on a social justice agenda. This campaign, and the findings and recommendations noted above, also reflects those made in the Freelancers Make Theatre Work ‘COVID-19: Routes to recovery’ evidence-based study of the UK’s freelance creative workforce<sup>6</sup>, which highlights the extent to which the financial hardship caused by the pandemic has fallen disproportionately on self-employed and freelance workers within the creative industry, emphasizing the urgent need for a sustainable and fair recovery package. Their survey raises concerns about the impact of COVID financially, but also in other ways that impact on the future of live performance in the UK, pointing to accentuated precarity and anxiety, along early career performers and those from under-represented backgrounds in particular. Both surveys, and the findings discussed above, point to the need for more qualitative research into performers’ lived experiences of the pandemic, and to their views on what they and the creative industry needs, in

<sup>6</sup> Freelancers Make Theatre Work ‘COVID-19: Routes to recover’ evidence-based study of the UK’s freelance creative workforce: <https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Routes-To-Recovery.pdf>

order to make an equitable and sustainable recovery from it.

workers', Livestream rally (via social media),  
6pm 16<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

### **Further research**

Further research is needed to investigate a number of issues raised. These include, first, why a substantial proportion of respondents had lost most/all of their income from performance but had not considered taking on other forms of paid work as this should shed some further light on the circumstances of self-employed performers and on the centrality of performance to their working lives and identities.

Second, the importance attributed to audience feedback, especially in the context of the existential, financial and practical concerns raised in this report, arguably render performers particularly vulnerable to the effects of negative feedback and worse, and further research is needed to explore this issue in more depth, not least in order to understand more about the potential long-term impact of COVID on the mental health of self-employed performers in the wake of the pandemic.

Finally, additional research is needed in order to understand more about the personal, practical, technological and artistic opportunities and challenges associated with lockdown and social distancing, and with the evolution of online and/or hybrid ways of working during the pandemic. This will enable us to understand more about the issues and experiences involved and to consider what self-employed performers and the industry might need in order to maintain some of the inclusivity, accessibility and sustainability, and sense of community, associated with these adapted ways of working in the future in a way that might complement rather than threaten the long-term survival of venue-based live performance.

### **References**

Equity (2021) 'The show can't go on: Equity demands basic income guarantee for creative