

Written evidence submitted by Dr Susan Jones

DCMS submission

Summary

This submission from Dr Susan Jones, an independent analyst and researcher specialising in contemporary visual arts, starts by contextualising artists' livelihood frameworks and sectoral artistic and economic opportunity, highlighting key challenges and barriers faced by this particular sub-section of the creative industries. It continues by evidencing the distinctive limitations of short-term emergency measures from Government and the Arts Council to alleviate immediate Covid19 circumstances. Although arts policy marginalised support for artists' livelihoods after the 2008 recession, examples given of artists' individualised resilience strategies illustrate the scope and value of supportive interventions by policy which are relevant when forecasting new strategies for ameliorating the medium and longer-term effects of the pandemic on this vital, distinctive creative industries sub-section. It finishes with a rationale for structural changes in implementation of arts policy and funding to remove known barriers and better in future capture and amplify the assets that artists create for their own resilience and bring to social well-being over a life-cycle.

1. Introduction

1.1 This submission is from independent researcher Dr Susan Jones who has expert knowledge of visual artists' development, employment and livelihoods. Her nuanced insight into conditions for this specific creative industries sub-set has been gained through leading an arts organisation supported by Arts Council England for 14 years, followed by doctoral study to evidence mechanisms for productive engagement between artists' livelihoods and arts policy in future.

2. Context

2.1 Current arts policy interventions fail to be supportive of most visual artists. An underlying misassumption is that the *modus operandi* of visual artists is similar to the creative industries where entrepreneurial individuals and micro businesses commonly pitch creative ideas using outline, illustrative proposals to secure new work contracts from commissioners and investors while leveraging the associated extrinsic artistic rewards as bi-product. However, unlike artists for whom heightening creative discovery is the driving force, a prerequisite for entrepreneurial endeavours is making a profit to sustain the business going forward. But when budgets and fees provided to artists by funded visual arts organisations are at minimum levels, these provide neither sufficient scope for artistic manoeuvre nor conditions supportive of artists' economic and social circumstances over a life-cycle.

2.2 Visual artists are important contributors to the arts economy. Their collective economic endeavours are worth an estimated £689m a year. However, artists' intangible assets to society are not appropriately recognised within arts policy and the operations of the arts.

There are no quantifications of artists' intrinsic worth to social well-being through provision of artistic gratification to people and communities, including of artists' pivotal contribution as providers of unique experiences, products and services to the resilience of funded arts organisations, including to job creation and retention.

2.3 Salaries for the employed arts workforce rose above inflation during the austerity period but pay for the self-employed remained consistently lower. Significantly, over two-thirds of those working in Arts Council regularly-funded organisations (NPOs) are freelance and self-employment levels at 77% amongst visual artists, who are nearly a quarter of all those in visual arts occupations, are markedly higher than elsewhere in the creative industries.

2.4 Patterns of inequality in the contemporary visual arts are both economic and social. Artists' average annual income from all sources is less than two thirds average national salaries. To survive economically, most have to supplement low income from self-employment with a portfolio of art-related work. One in five have three or more different jobs, these often on a PAYE 'zero hours' basis. This includes occasional lecturing in Higher Education and customer service roles in cultural and creative industries organisations. The former are notorious for late payment and in the latter, minimum wage and non-permanent contracts are the norm. Just 28% of visual artists nowadays enjoy the security of regular jobs as lecturers, academics or arts teachers, whereas 35 years ago it was nearly three-quarters.

2.5 This circle of 'high-risk, low-paid work' makes visual artists' livelihoods highly precarious. Low income levels and resulting lack of savings mean that few artists have financial resources to fall back on to cover unexpected circumstances including illness or impacts of external shocks such as the economic recession after 2008 and Covid19.

2.6 The continuous, competitive churn of job-seeking, disappointment of frequent rejection and power held over artists by intermediaries undermine artists' confidence to act independently over a life-cycle and are not supportive of the values and beliefs which form the foundation of artists' art practices and are their *raison d'être*.

2.7 The high level of speculative, competitive work expected of visual artists by contemporary visual arts gatekeepers is intellectually, emotionally and economically challenging. The particular *modus operandi* of the contemporary visual arts constrains artists' livelihoods by limiting opportunity to negotiate freelance terms and conditions commensurate with level of experience, reputation and income needs. Visual artists are typically presented with pre-determined budgets and terms based on what publicly-funded arts organisations have budgeted for or are prepared to pay. For example, a commissioned exhibition that contributes to the artistic standing and economic resilience of a major Arts Council England NPO gallery which may take the artist a year to produce commands a fee of just £6,000 (a-n The Artists Information Company, 2016). This baseline economic disadvantage is compounded when over a quarter of advertised opportunities offer exposure rather than money.

2.8 Self-employment is in effect a theoretical status, as it is rare for artists to be able to negotiate for what they financially need from visual arts work. Less than a fifth of artists are

represented by galleries who would conduct such pay negotiations on the artist's behalf. Although Arts Council policy states commitment to talent development and innovation, less than 2% of the artists' constituency annually gains access to R&D grants. Success rates for Arts Council direct funding to artists have fallen from 52% in 2003 (Grants for the Arts) to just 12.7% in 2019 (Developing your creative practice).

2.9 Females represent up to 70% of all visual artists but earn over a quarter less than male counterparts. This and expectation of mobility are barriers for women with or wishing to take on family responsibilities. Statistically, visual artists are less likely than the population as a whole to have the dependent children who form part of supportive structures necessary in old age.

2.10. Poor financial reward levels and implicit expectation that artists can self-finance/subsidise work such as in publicly-funded galleries further contributes to limited opportunity for meritocracy. In particular, individuals from lower social classes and ethnic backgrounds lack entry-points to the arts and creative industries as a whole.

3. Immediate impact of Covid-19 on visual artists

3.1 Surveys conducted over recent weeks show that at least half of all visual artists were economically affected by the lockdown period through immediate loss of contracted work and cancellation of regular and forward expectations. This data illustrates in quantitative terms the immediate economic impact on artists of volatility in markets in the face of unexpected shocks which affect both private and public sectors.

3.2 The government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme catered for those with the security of regular employment contracts in the arts and elsewhere. The offer for the self-employed was both less comprehensive in scope and funds were slower to materialise. Significantly, the government's Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and Arts Council England Covid19 Emergency Fund for Individuals shared an eligibility criterion that made a substantial section of visual artists ineligible.

3.3 The requirement of both schemes for applicants to earn 50% of income from self-employment conflicts with the reality of artists' livelihoods and the 'portfolio' work patterns and 'mixed income' sources from self-employment and PAYE as described above. Arts Council England's emergency support scheme with a budget of £16m generated 14,000 applications in two rounds in April was expansive in scope, open to 'writers, translators, producers, editors, educators, directors and designers ... choreographers, composers, visual artists, craft makers and curators'.

3.4 The unreasonable eligibility criterion for government and Arts Council one-off emergency financial measures excluded a large proportion of practising visual artists by failing to recognise known long-standing work and income patterns within that sector. In addition the Arts Council scheme effectively curtailed access to funding to individual artists for the remainder year by including budgets allocated to open-access schemes Developing your creative practice and National lottery project grants. This scheme was 35%

oversubscribed and the maximum £2,500 award available from the emergency fund too low in that it represents just a quarter of the value of a Developing your creative practice grant.

4 Longer-term impacts of Covid19 on artists' livelihoods

4.1 The 2008 worldwide financial crash and the austerity period following provides a pertinent reference point for considering the longer-term economic and social impact of the pandemic and evidencing the direct impact on artists' livelihoods. In statistical terms, the economic downturn in artists' opportunity for work was irrevocable. During, the relative value of work openly-offered to artists more than halved (2007-2016). Contemporaneously, around 70% of artists' income from art practices derives from arrangements with galleries and exhibitions (TBR, 2018). Both commercial and publicly-funded galleries were affected by austerity, with many smaller galleries and agencies ceasing to trade and reduction of programme budgets in publicly-funded galleries. By 2013, 71% of galleries paid no fees to artists for exhibiting and three-fifths didn't even reimburse their expenses.

4.2. Analysis of individualised instances demonstrates how artists' natural agility and resilience in the face of adversity was brought to the fore after the financial crash. My own qualitative research illustrates artists' capacity to rebuild their livelihoods and continue their careers by devising highly-personalised strategies that account for the particularity of their professional and social circumstances. The starting point was for artists to take change of their own destinies by fine-tuning the supportive 'circles of trust' around their art practices built up over time in their immediate location. In combination with personally-devised professional development, in which artists identified resources such as mentors of their own choosing and localised training, these proved more effective than accessing generic business training, or chasing one-off work contracts with limited security or prospects away from home and support structures.

4.3 In contrast, artists' livelihoods were purposefully deprioritised at this time by the Arts Council, which cut regular funding to an important layer of artists' development structures. Some 6,000 artists using long-standing artist-run spaces, national and regionally-significant membership and advocacy bodies and production and technical support facilities were adversely affected. This decision in tandem with decline in success rates for direct funding to artists marginalised the significance to the cultural landscape of supporting artist-devised strategies 'on the ground'. The Arts Council instead prioritised resources to what it perceived as 'frontline' arts organisations, including galleries. The explicit expectation that the funded institutions would 'do more' for artists, including paying fairly those they commissioned or showed, was not monitored nor were wider impacts quantified.

4.4 In addition individual artists were specifically excluded from the Arts Council 2015-2018 goal to create a 'diverse and highly skilled' workforce. Although talent development objectives as delivered through funded arts organisations might have improved artists' career and livelihood prospects, by the Arts Council's own admission, no evidence was found that 'clear and effective talent development routes' had been available to artists over a decade of this policy (ACE 2018).

5 Evolving the sector after Covid-19

5.1 The pandemic has put a harsh spotlight on the endemic discriminations, misrecognitions and inequalities across the nation, including in the workings of the arts and creative industries. Divides due to wealth, income, race and social status have been reinforced, in part by the misassumptions framing emergency financial support. When forecasting a more inclusive and productive future for citizens through the arts, the ambition must be to recognise and support the all aspects that bind us and within thus, to redress the marginalisation of independent creators. A prerequisite of this is meaningful investment in interactions of differing weights and scales across the arts, including full incorporation in publicly-funded infrastructures of those generated and animated 'on the ground' by artists themselves within their communities.

5.2 Such ambitions fall within strategies for systematic removal of discriminatory practices to achieve the equality of opportunity required for public and government bodies including DCMS and Arts Council England. This applies equally to the working practices of Arts Council's open-access grant schemes as to arrangements with regularly and occasionally funded arts organisations.

5.3 It is vital post pandemic that past policy mistakes, which by undervaluing visual artists' varied contributions to society embedded economic and social barriers to their pursuit of livelihoods through art practices over time, are not repeated. Remedies designed to deliver 'human thriving' in the arts in the decades ahead are structural in nature, requiring strategic redirection from the top down of financial resources and active cooperation of all committed to the resilience of the arts as a societal necessity. They rest on three operating principles:

- Diversification of arts policy mechanisms and delivery in order to place the focus on enabling divergent, localised communities of interest including independent visual artists to engage directly and consistently with them and to expand their personal and professional horizons through the arts over a life-time;
- Democratisation of arts development and decision-making processes to the grassroots through application of subsidiarity;
- Devolving suitable levels of funding as a strategic long-term shift from a London-centric national arts body in order to give direct artistic and economic responsibility to accountable localised arts structures, such as the through strategic re-engagement with local authorities.

5.4 These principles suggested for future publicly-funded arts development which are by necessity experimental, are intended to redress the marginalisation of a vital section of the creative industries workforce. They are more complex to scope and deliver than the 'trickle down' economy-driven model for arts development pursued for decades by government, the arm's length agencies and adopted within funded arts organisations. However, fresh ideas are well worth considering because the current hierarchical method has demonstrably failed to deliver equality of opportunity and to improve the social and economic status of

those at the bottom of the food chain. This includes visual artists, who are no better off in social or economic terms than they were in 1985.