

Introduction & Provocations from Freelancers

The meeting was a space for over 40 freelancers to share their experiences, needs and wants, to bring to the table the voices of 70% of those working in theatre who are freelance, and for their voices to be heard by companies and venues.

We all want the same thing - for the children and young people for whom we make work, to see and experience the best possible theatre/performance.

It was unusual and exciting to have so many freelancers at one of these meetings, so representatives of companies and venues were invited to take this opportunity to listen and reflect, to hear what freelancers need in order to make their best work - and to reflect on what their organisation/company might be able to do to support this. It was recognised by the freelancers that many companies and venues are already beacons of excellence/models of good practice but there might be something mentioned by a freelancer that they don't do already, or there may be something that they could do better.

It was just the start of a conversation and will, we hope, set the agenda for ongoing discussions.

There was an amazing range of responses from the freelancers at the meeting to the two questions posed. This report collects and consolidates the responses into four categories for each question, and the first page is a brief summary of the categories and some key points within those.

The image below shows the most common themes which emerged from the discussion, the different sizes indicating frequency the word/theme was mentioned (apart from Performance-Young-Audiences, freelancers and organisations which were added to demonstrate context)



SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

QUESTION 1: What do you need as freelancers to do your best work?

- **Time and money:** Being paid properly for development and design time. Paid time to be creative and develop our practice without working towards a specific project. Rates of pay which mean we don't have to take on too many jobs to make ends meet and can have a work/life balance, not treating ITC minimum rates as standard. Being paid on time, and not working unpaid hours, or long days and weeks.
- **Communication and respect:** Timely responses to/acknowledgment of communication, a response even if the answer is no. Genuine communication and dialogue with organisations. Clear points of contact, being introduced to staff and team members, being able to ask questions. Clear briefing, and being given confirmation of jobs, information and schedules well in advance.
- **Practical support:** Help with funding applications and contracts. Understanding of and help with childcare requirements. Storage space for sets and props, access to studios.
- **Collaboration and opportunities:** Organisations actively looking beyond their usual collaborators to work with new people. Partnerships and links to collaborators, organisations, communities and young audiences.

QUESTION 2: What do you need as freelancers to creatively empower you - to make you feel valued?

- **Communication and a sense of community:** Not feeling that our relationship with organisations ends with the project, being treated as if we are part of the family. Organisations reaching out to freelancers, continuing events like venue town halls to connect with organisations and each other.
- **Practical support:** Dedicated desks/space to work in venues and rehearsal spaces, storage space, studios. Practices which support good mental health.
- **To be valued and represented:** Being made part of discussions and ideas exchange with organisations even when not directly working with them, being represented on boards. Being valued for our experience and skills, paid to attend creative design meetings and for consultation, credited for our work. For young audiences work to be celebrated, and not considered less important than work for adults.
- **Development opportunities:** Training, mentorship, grants and career development opportunities which are not restricted to younger people. Being able to set the agenda for training and development opportunities at organisations/venues. Opportunities for paid collaboration, to be paid for our ideas and skills as well as the end product.

COLLECTED RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

What do you need as freelancers to do your best work?

Time and money

Fees which reflect the value of our work, and are high enough that we don't need to juggle more jobs than is manageable. Understanding of and proper payment for the amount of time which goes into design, development and preparation.

Time to be creative, plan, make mistakes and fail. Not being brought into a process very late and having to make very quick decisions.

Proper commissioning money from venues who "commission" work.

A good lead in time! Ideally with at least one R+D period. Think especially important for work for young audiences where script might not always be most apt starting point. Longer commissioning periods, not having funding confirmed at the last minute.

Space and thinking time between R&D and rehearsal. Ongoing relationship/open door to talk about projects at early stages. Access to the whole team and props at an early stage (including production staff)

Access to funded time, space and facilities to think, dream, collaborate, play and develop new ideas without it being results driven, or towards a final production. Funded development, training and admin time. Access to mid career artistic development, funding (inc seed funding, in kind support and access to larger pots of funding/commissions)

Not being expected to take on extra work outside our original/agreed role without payment.

Many people were expected to work for free on a fringe theatre scale before corona and now post corona this is going to be even more difficult and even more exclusionary. We need money to support us now and we need grants.

Shorter payment windows, being paid on time, not needing to chase payment and being kept updated about late payment if it happens.

An end to long working days, working more than five days a week and working through breaks. In PYA freelancers often work long weeks, touring, 2/3 daily shows, get ins and outs - being exhausted from rehearsals can result in illness with no cover. Time off and time to recover when ill.

ITC rates are too low. Low rates for accommodation mean you either are only able to work locally or can't afford to take work in other places. Then even where this may be possible, larger fees are needed to take in better consideration of people with families so they can rent accommodation big enough for their families to visit.

There is a problem with companies / producers using the Equity / ITC rates and T&Cs as enough, rather than just a basic starting point.

Accessible hours for all / flexible schedules with a quiet hour at the end of each day - this allows people to leave at an earlier time without feeling bad for it, and ensures that stage management aren't working past everyone else leaving to sort out from, write rehearsal reports etc all which is usually not covered in pay properly. It also means that if towards end of rehearsal if you feel you don't have enough time, oh look there is the quiet hour to use.

Ideally time that allows a work life balance, especially with working families.

Communication and respect

Timely responses to communication, acknowledgment and responding even if the answer is no. Genuine communication/conversation and meaningful artistic dialogue from commissioning venues / the 'gatekeepers' / people with the ability to help us realise our creative ideas.

Clear and direct dialogue between R&D, rehearsal, to other staff if needed to get the yes and no, and being linked where necessary to others and the right communities depending on the work.

Clarity in briefing and what is required of us. Being allowed to ask questions.

A clear, written understanding between all creatives and venues as to what each role entails.

Less assumptions - I know many of us are desperate to do the best possible job, and will spend way over the allotted time to make something match the deadline, but that doesn't mean that the next time we can work at that level. Chatting about and re-evaluating things before just assuming we will do everything again.

To not feel that the relationship is just about what I can give you, and will end when you find my flaws.

Always having a proper schedule well ahead of time to allow us to plan our personal lives and other work in advance. A plan of who is going to be in rehearsals/R&D ahead of time.

Clearer point of contact for venues / companies, not just an info@ address.

To be involved in debriefs.

Not being referred to as the little show.

Practical support

Storage space for set and props, studio workspace.

Contract advice and support with doing funding applications.

Childcare - support, support of costs and understanding. Childcare onsite, or thought about by the producers or venue or company (whoever is 'hosting' or in charge of the project)

I'd like to know from ACE that it is ok to include extra childcare provision as part of a project grant. This area is really muddy. It could be an access cost.

Bigger teams to make get ins/get outs and performance days more manageable.

Collaboration and opportunities

Companies actively looking to meet new creatives. People thinking of the wider freelance group and really trying to use a variety of people rather than those you might habitually go to, so that everyone gets some work. In performance for young audiences it feels like people often use the same pool of freelancers and it's hard to get in.

Trust, confidence and a safe but challenging and exciting atmosphere amongst the creative team.

I need less isolation! I need collaborators, a creative team around me. And partners - partner schools, partner organisations... venues. Those with more resources than my tiny team who believe in, and will champion, the project.

Being collectively empowered to make improvements in working practice, maintaining changes which are beginning to be made during COVID.

Guidance and bridges to chat to Communities and Young Audiences to ensure the work is as responsive as possible.

Challenging the assumption that theatre for young audiences has to look and be a certain way - bravery around this from venues and producers.

What do you need as freelancers to creatively empower you - to make you feel valued?

Communication and a sense of community

Being fully included in any company when you're brought in. Feeling part of the wider family, ongoing relationships that last beyond the work you are doing. Being treated by buildings as if you are part of their staff, eg. Christmas parties, opening nights, skill training, development opportunities, networking events.

Longer term commitment / support / partnerships with venues.

Consideration in terms of notice so notice for auditions, a simple yes/no after meetings etc., time if things are rearranged so call times, cancellations etc. - performers are often the last to know of any changes or updates

A sense of connection to a community - continuing events like this one and the town hall meetings being held by theatres during COVID, theatres holding freelancer networking events. Networks and conversations which are ongoing regardless of work being created.

Less guardedness from artistic/executive teams, more information about forthcoming seasons.

Venues / companies looking outward to freelancers - starting conversations, inviting ideas, having open calls.

I've had contact from several companies/theatres who I've worked for prior to COVID-19 who have been making efforts to send me work during this time and/or check in with me, which has been hugely appreciated.

To feel involved - I think the FTF is fabulous but has also made many freelancers that I have spoken with feel even less involved in the industry. If we were not picked to be the sponsored person, what does that mean of our relationship to the venues or organisations we have worked with.

Recognition now that the day of liveness is coming and needs preparing for.

Practical support

A dedicated space/desk, possibly outside the rehearsal room, for freelancers to set up and work - "I'm a set + costume designer - a space/desk inside the building but perhaps outside the rehearsal room is definitely handy when you need to process something quietly. Esp useful if working away"

I need my own mental health to be strong to navigate the difficulties of the creative process, and get on with it regardless of circumstances. To stay listening, responding and reacting.

To be valued and represented

Being made part of discussions in buildings/companies, even though you are a freelancer - so that you feel like your voice matters, that your creative vision matters.

To have an ideas exchange with venues and companies when not directly working with them. To be appreciated for our diversity of experience.

Feeling part of the wider theatre world and respected for the experience we have to give to new work.

For skills to be valued at every stage - not just as a 'tick box' at the end.

My role being recognised as professional and specialist from an earlier point in my career (I've really had to earn it) - I think this is a wider issue though and starts from the way we educate in schools about the arts.

Acknowledgment of artists' contribution, eg. not placing photos in buildings with no credits.

Not only a recognition that PYA work is a crucial, high quality, often far more egalitarian/accessible art form (than performance for adult audiences) but a celebration of that. Better fees, to be taken seriously, for people to stop assuming it's easier, or that it's for emerging artists to cut their teeth on, before they get going 'properly' and start making work for adult audiences.

To be invited to creative design meetings and be paid to attend them.

If working for venues or orgs - freelancers on the board of that venue or org to represent us and our needs.

Redressing the power balance between freelancers and funding bodies.

Appreciation/Advice - that I did a good job. We have no appraisal, no manager, often no feedback or advisor in how we can develop our skills.

Paid consultation time - I am constantly giving advice, or talking about projects and never get paid for that time, but often feel that I can not not give that time, as then I won't be booked for the job or the organisation at all.

Development opportunities

Mentorship schemes, mentorship to work in new areas to keep work fresh and active.

'Early career' opportunities not only for 18-25 year olds (development opportunities/training/grants)

If self-producing - venues and organisations to let us set the agenda for training or development opportunities.

Opportunities for paid collaboration, to be paid for my ideas and skills as well as the end 'product', opportunities to grow my organisation.

Ideas for the future

A written charter of best practice for working with freelancers.

A database/pool of freelancers for organisations to refer to, and as a resource for freelancers to connect with each other.

To be invited to team chats, or venues that I have a relationship with. I feel like I can only get a vibe of what is happening via twitter (which is soul destroying at the moment) and also often after an event. A central resource of events that we can come to, ask questions, or just observe would be comforting. I know no one has answers, but feel very out of the loop in knowing things that are even being discussed or what are the questions out there.

The meeting was hosted by PYA England, chaired by Wendy Harris.

The Freelance Taskforce TYA group who hosted and facilitated the discussion:

Sarah Argent, Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey, Althea Burey, Jane Crawshaw, Maia Kirk Rich, Hannah McPake, Naomi Oppenheim, Hannah Quigley, Jessica Thanki.