



Working and living conditions of artists in Northern Ireland

Results from a study commissioned
by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Why did ACNI commission this research?

From October 2023 to March 2024, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) commissioned Perspective Economics to conduct a comprehensive study on the working and living conditions of artists in Northern Ireland. The research provides an enhanced evidence base to help understand the key challenges and barriers facing artists, advocate for artists, and consider new ways of supporting the sector.

In 2010 ACNI commissioned a study into the Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. However, more than a decade has passed since the previous study and within this period there have been a number of challenging factors shaping the arts sector. These factors include a real-term loss of public funding to the arts, the short-term and long-term impact of COVID-19 and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

The short-term and long-term impact of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis are among the challenges which have shaped the arts sector over the last 10 years.

How was the data collected and analysed?

An advisory group supported this work. It was composed of two artists, one academic, a representative from the Department for Communities and three staff members from ACNI. Perspective Economics designed the questionnaire based on the 2010 study. The draft questionnaire was shared with the group for their comments and suggestions.

Perspective Economics distributed the survey online. It gathered 481 usable responses from a diverse range of artists across various demographics, career stages, and artistic disciplines.

This short document highlights some of the key findings from the survey. For the full report, please click [here](#).

What is the profile of artists in Northern Ireland?

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DEMOGRAPHIC

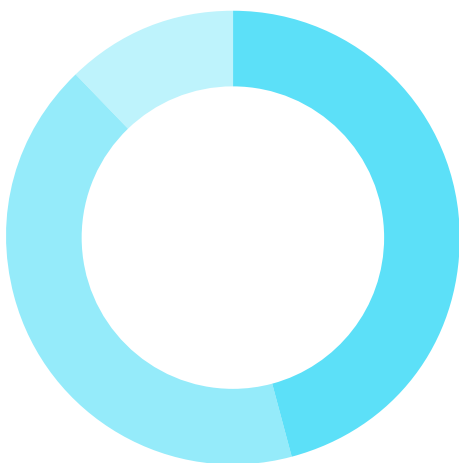
Demographic

Using the Annual Population Survey and results from our own survey, we estimate that the total artist population in Northern Ireland is approximately 14,500.

7,600 employees in arts occupations are the 'core artist population', 6,900 individuals represent the 'wider part-time and additional artist population'. We also estimate that 2,000 individuals are the 'wider retired/unemployed/voluntary population'.

There are approximately 14,500 artists in Northern Ireland.

Artist Population



●
7,600
Core full-time
artist population

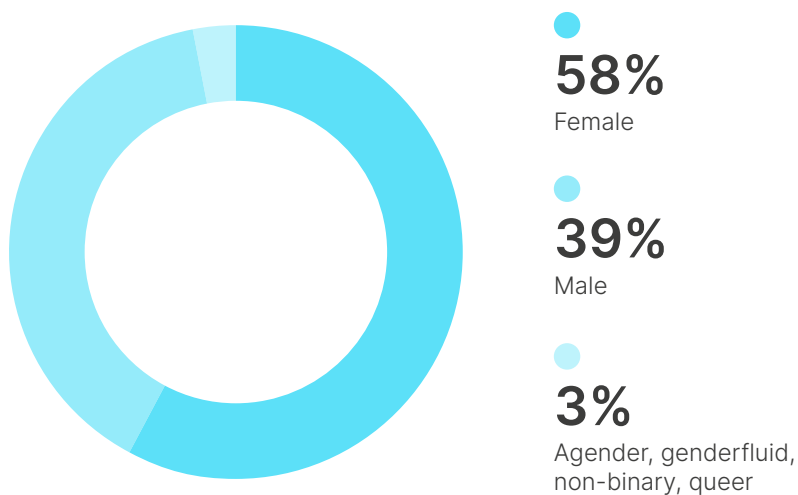
●
6,900
Wider part-time
artist population

●
2,000
Voluntary population

DEMOGRAPHIC

Our survey encompasses a diverse sample of artists across Northern Ireland, with 61% of respondents from outside Belfast. Most respondents (95%) are of working age (18–64), with a gender distribution of 58% female, 39% male, and 3% identifying as agender, genderfluid, non-binary, or queer.

Gender Distribution of Respondents



A significant portion of artists in Northern Ireland (23%) report having a disability. This is similar to Northern Ireland wide estimates (c. 21% for those between 16-64 years old according to NI Census 2021). 31% considered themselves neurodiverse. This is higher than the UK population average at around 15%, as reported by the University of Edinburgh.

Income and Employment

We asked artists for a range of their total income and their income from arts activities. The mean total income reported by those that made some of their income from arts activities was £19,200 in 2023 (n=416). The mean income directly related to their arts activities is £11,200 (or 58% of their total income).

Artists in Northern Ireland earn on average just £11,200 per year from their arts activities.



11%↓

Comparing total income to the 2010 research survey baseline suggests that artists have faced a real-term reduction in overall income by 11% between 2010 and 2023. For the wider economy, mean wages increased by 1% in that same period.



£23,100

Artists aged 45–54 have the highest average income (£23,100) and one of the highest percentages of income from arts (63%), while those aged 18–34 have the lowest average income (£16,300) and a lower percentage of income from arts (50%).



£17,100

Artists with a disability and artists with neurodiversity have a lower average income (£17,100) and a lower percentage of income from arts (51% and 56% respectively) compared to those without a disability or neurodiversity.

INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

Established artists have the highest average income (£20,800) and the highest percentage of income from arts (75%), while emerging artists have the lowest average income (£15,100) and the lowest percentage of income from arts (34%).

Male artists have a higher average income (£20,750) compared to female artists (£18,700), although the percentage of income from arts is similar (58% for males and 59% for females).



£16,600

Artists who spend more than 40 hours per week on arts-related work have the highest average income from their arts activities (£16,600 or 84% of their total income). This represents around £8 per hour, approximately 30% lower than the National Living Wage (from April 2024).



£21,000

Artists with a postgraduate degree have a slightly higher average income (£21,000) compared to those with a bachelor's degree (£19,000) or other education levels (£16,600).

The figures on level of education and income highlight a limited 'salary premium' for higher levels of education in the arts compared with lifetime earnings estimates across other disciplines. Whilst this is a slightly higher income than other education levels, this suggests that net lifetime return of arts education is typically limited or in many instances, negative.

INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

Full-time employees in the arts sector have the highest average income (£30,000) and a relatively high percentage of income from arts (83%). However, income falls substantially among those self-employed at £16,300.

Only 40% of working-age artists regularly contribute to a workplace pension or SIPP.



Self-employed, freelance, and business owner artists are less likely to contribute to a pension scheme compared to full-time and part-time employees in the arts.



27% of artists with arts-related income have received at least one public grant in the past.

Artists who attended grammar schools between the ages of 11–16 have a higher average income (£20,000) and a higher percentage of income from arts (60%) compared to those who attended secondary schools (£17,900 and 53%, respectively).

27% of artists with arts-related income have received at least one public grant in the past, and these artists earn approximately £2,600 more per annum from the arts compared to those who have not received a grant.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Education and Skills

78% of artists in Northern Ireland have a degree; of which, 63% hold a degree or postgraduate qualification in an arts-related field.

On average, artists in Northern Ireland possess three additional qualifications, certifications, or professional training beyond their primary education. This illustrates the depth of expertise and commitment to continuous learning within the artist community.

Although the arts community is highly trained and educated, few artists are able to work full-time and earning potential is very limited.



24%

23.9% of artists have undertaken some form of training in community arts or participation and 17% in mental health.



>52%

More than 52% of artists felt that their artistic education or qualifications did not adequately prepare them for the professional arts sector and employment opportunities.

For 49% of artists, the most valuable improvement to better support and preparing them for entering the arts sector in Northern Ireland is having more showcase or launch events for emerging artists.

NORTHERN IRELAND AS A PLACE TO WORK

Northern Ireland as a Place to Work

Two-thirds of respondents cited the lack of opportunities within Northern Ireland as a significant factor influencing their decision to pursue arts-related opportunities elsewhere. Artists pointed to the potential for higher income, increased opportunities for personal networking and collaborations as key factors attracting them to pursue careers in the arts outside of Northern Ireland.

Over half (53.3%) of the survey participants indicated they have considered or would consider permanently relocating outside of Northern Ireland for better career opportunities in the arts.



40%

Artists in Northern Ireland derive a significant portion (around 40%) of their arts-related income from sources outside of Northern Ireland.



66%

66% of artists aged 18–34 indicated that a lack of career opportunities in Northern Ireland presents a critical challenge to retaining talent in NI.

WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Wellbeing and Mental Health

Artists in Northern Ireland exhibit lower levels of life satisfaction, happiness, and a significantly higher level of anxiety compared to the broader population in the region.

On average, artists' life satisfaction scores are lower for artists in Northern Ireland. On a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely), artists report on average 5.9 to the question 'Overall, how satisfied you are with your life nowadays?'. For the whole of Northern Ireland this figure is 7.6. They also report feeling less happy, scoring 6.1 on average to the questions 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?'. For the whole of Northern Ireland, this figure was 7.6.

Artists experience high levels of anxiety compared to the general population.

Most strikingly, the survey suggests that anxiety is more prevalent amongst artists than for the general population. On average, artists reported anxiety levels of 5.1, but for the whole of Northern Ireland this average was only 2.9.

30%

30% of artists perceive mental health issues as personal barriers or challenges that hinder their ability to create, exhibit, sell or perform their work.

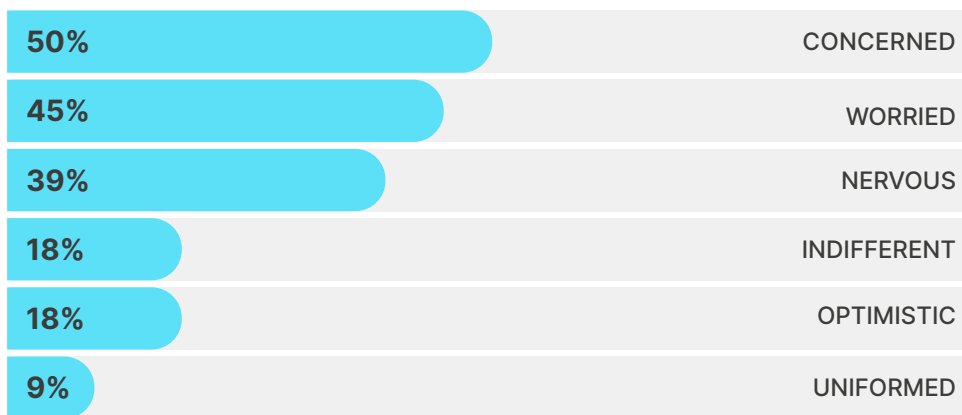
>50%

Over half of neurodiverse or artists with disabilities see mental health as a significant challenge, compared to only 22% of non-neurodiverse artists.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Challenges and Opportunities

While there is some optimism and excitement about the adoption of AI in the arts sector, many artists are concerned about authenticity and intellectual property issues associated with AI-generated art, and worried about the implications for their livelihoods and job security.



The main challenges faced by artists in Northern Ireland are financial barriers (80%), time constraints (60%), job insecurity (59%), and feelings of not being valued (54%).

The top support mechanisms that artists feel is needed to maximise opportunities and create a better arts ecosystem include:



More financial grants and funding opportunities



Advocacy for artists' rights and fair pay



Advocacy for new funding models



Improved access to affordable studio or performance spaces



Access to affordable art supplies, materials, and equipment

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