

EQUITY

**Equity response to the independent review of Arts Council
England**

June 2025

About

1. Equity is the largest creative industries trade union with 50,000 members united in the fight for fair terms and conditions across the performing arts and entertainment. Our members are actors, singers, dancers, designers, directors, models, stage managers, stunt performers, choreographers, circus performers, puppeteers, comedians, voice artists, supporting artists and variety performers. They work on stage, on TV and film sets, on the catwalk, in film studios, in recording studios, in night clubs and in circus tents.
2. Most Equity members work on fixed-term contracts and, typically, fall into the category of Limb (b) workers who are considered self-employed for tax purposes and 'worker' for the purposes of employment law. Equity also represents members who work on an entirely freelance basis. Equity's membership is among the youngest of any UK trade union, the most common age is 28 and most members are under 41. Three per cent of Equity's members identify as deaf or disabled.

Contact

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Summary

3. Equity welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the independent review of Arts Council England (ACE). Our work with members has indicated that there is a need for reform across the funding landscape to achieve the aims of ACE and to reinvigorate the arts and entertainment landscape across England.

1.	<i>In what way(s) does ACE fulfil its current mandate?</i>
2.	<i>What changes, if any, would you like to see in ACE's mandate?</i>
4.	<i>In what way(s) could ACE deliver more effectively?</i>

4. Equity is proposing that the independent review recommends reforms to ACE's current funding and governance model to prioritise the creation of new high-quality professional art and the development of regional creative ecosystems that will, in the long term, generate local creative jobs and reinvigorate England's arts and culture landscape.

5. Equity believes that ACE should better nurture and develop the cultural ecosystem by focusing on three core principles:
- The ‘encouragement of the living artist’ through the provision of sufficient professional work on union terms and conditions.
 - The growth of regional arts and entertainment economies across England, building from a federalised system of ACE-funded anchor institutions.
 - Support for a wide range of artistic works based on artistic merit, through incorporating workforce voice into key decision-making.

Support for the living artist

6. As Jennie Lee’s 1965 White Paper stated, “one of the main objectives of the Government’s policy [towards the arts] is to encourage the living artist.” In generating work for artists on appropriate terms and conditions, ACE plays an important role in creating the conditions for sustainable professional creative careers, workforce skills development and intellectual property formation. This foundational productive role in the sector, including the way that ACE shapes and sustains its labour markets, should be better reflected in the objects set out under its mandate.
7. Instead, ACE’s mandate currently lacks any mention of ACE’s role in supporting the creation of works of art. While Equity agrees that it is important that art is accessible to the public, that education is advanced, and with the object to ‘develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts’ we feel it would be appropriate for the charter to contain explicit reference to the production of professional art, and to the workforce that creates artistic works and who are the foundation of the entire arts and entertainment sector.
8. Professional work in the performing arts and entertainment remains deeply precarious. The average earnings of an Equity member from industry work is £15,300. Our research shows that 63% of our members have relied on social security at some point in their life, largely intermittently or for short periods. During the pandemic, 40% of Equity members received no direct support from the government’s pandemic income support schemes. Variety artists – who perform their own acts such as singing, juggling, comedy and burlesque – are in a particularly precarious position, as they are generally considered to be self-employed under employment law and do not benefit from certain rights such as sick leave. These artists are also vulnerable to losing work through the decline in venues that would have hired them, such as pubs and working men’s clubs. Equity notes that the government’s planned cuts to social security, if adopted as announced in spring 2025, will have a devastating effect on many of our members.

9. ACE helps to challenge this precarity by committing to directing its funding towards creative work on industry-standard terms and conditions, which reflect the collectively bargained agreements operating across the overwhelming majority of work made in the live performance arts. This is a central principle of ACE's support for artists and is core to its role in growing local arts and entertainment economies.
10. Support for artists should extend to expanding skills and training opportunities for precarious, poorly paid artists. Previously, ACE offered free training for dancers along with pay for those who attended to mitigate any lost earnings, for example. Renewing ACE provision of financially supported skills and training would help to fulfil the professional needs of the workforce.

The development of regional arts and entertainment economies across England, building from ACE-funded anchor institutions.

11. The National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) process appears to be breaking down, with repeated extensions to the existing portfolio and a recent history of poor decision-making. We believe that this system requires urgent reform.
12. ACE could better nurture the cultural ecosystem through reforming the governance of the National Portfolio system. Equity's proposed ACE National Portfolio funding system would be formed of three separate funding streams.
 - i. An 'Institutional' stream, providing stable, unrestricted and long-term funding settlements to larger anchoring 'arts' institutions in creative clusters in every region across England, and
 - ii. A 'Portfolio' stream which would continue to fund organisations that are neither national institutions nor individual projects.
 - iii. A 'Projects' stream, providing smaller grant funding to projects based on artistic merit.

i. The Institutional Stream

13. The institutional stream should provide stable, unrestricted and long-term funding to large regularly-funded anchor institutions in regions, allowing these institutions to produce and tour work and to receive work from other institutions. Funding in this stream should be guaranteed on a long-term (e.g. 10-year) basis, reducing the burden of continual re-application cycles for institutions that are well established and critical to ACE's national portfolio and allowing them to direct more of their funding to creating, producing and touring work as opposed to the grant application cycle. In addition, it will allow for much more accurate financial planning for anchor institutions and, indeed, for ACE itself.

14. The long-term guarantee of funding should not mean that funding remains static for the period, but ACE's ongoing commitment will include inbuilt mechanisms to ensure that funding reflects economic circumstances. Similarly, there should be capacity in the system for additional funding to be granted to anchor institutions on an ad hoc basis, such as for emergencies or to respond to unforeseen opportunities.
15. At the heart of the Institutional funding stream should be a federalised National anchor institution system, similar to the system in Germany, composed of a national, publicly co-ordinated network of regularly-funded producing theatres, opera houses, ballet and dance companies, and variety houses from every region of the UK, each of which both produces work, and receives work from anchor institutions in other regions. Access to this federalised national system (and the related Institutional funding stream) should be based on a clear and ambitious set of criteria, with requirements for national anchor institutions to create and produce new work, demonstrate that they are creating jobs for their local labour market, engage workers on industry standard terms and conditions and ensure that work is accessible to all.
16. This system would support the government's growth agenda and industrial strategies by ensuring that National anchor institutions form part of creative clusters in each region, with connections to neighbouring film and TV production centres. These creative clusters replicate across the country the conditions that led to the production of award-winning shows such as War Horse, Fleabag, Billy Elliott and I, Daniel Blake many of which transferred between live performance, film and TV. Regional creative clusters anchored by ACE-funded institutions would have positive economic agglomeration effects. This system would also help to build a local creative labour market, ending regional reliance on London workforces over time, while providing creative career opportunities for local young people. This would allow regional institutions to create meaningful outreach programmes, that provide genuine labour market opportunities in the arts and entertainment. They would also act to build the local arts and entertainment economy, supporting other 'portfolio' and 'project' funded works in their area.
17. A further benefit of this system could be the pooling of some senior, non-creative, managerial functions across anchor institutions, as well as storage, systems and facilities costs, allowing individual institutions to divert additional resources to the production of artistic works.
18. Under ACE's existing commitment to funding work on industry-standard terms and conditions, the Institutional funding stream should contain inbuilt enforcement and accountability mechanisms to hold anchor institutions to high standards for not only

creating great art but creating and maintaining high quality jobs for the creative workforce as well as increasing the accessibility of arts for all.

ii. The Portfolio Stream

19. The 'Portfolio' stream would act as a funding mechanism to support organisations that are neither national institutions nor individual projects, such as touring companies, children's theatre or Theatre in Education. The emphasis should be placed on expanding the ecology of independent sector productions, new public regional theatres, small-scale touring companies and theatre-in-education companies, each creating work through engagement with local communities.

iii. The Projects Stream

20. Community based engagement will be advanced through the 'Projects' funding stream.
21. The Projects funding stream should provide support to artists applying for smaller grants related to specific projects outside of the work being undertaken at anchor institutions. By providing this project-based funding pot, freelancers and applicants who are not backed by a professional grant-writing team would not have to compete with large established institutions who have more resources available to put into applications. Removing many larger institutions from the shorter application cycle should reduce administrative burdens on ACE, providing additional capacity to devote to supporting successful applicants for smaller grants.
22. The criteria for accessing funding through this route should be different to that for being a part of the Institutional funding stream and should be more tailored to the freedoms and constraints of freelance and community-based work. One key criticism that Equity members with experience of applying for ACE funding under the current system have levelled is that freelancers feel at a disadvantage when applying for funding against large, established institutions and that the level of information requested for smaller sums of funding is the same as that for significantly larger sums.
23. By reducing the cycle of applications currently imposed upon anchor arts institutions, who will instead be provided with longer-term funding settlements under the 'Institutional stream', ACE will have more capacity to provide additional support to small artists seeking grants to advance artistic works under the 'Projects' stream.
24. These proposals align with ACE's ambitions to develop new professional artists working on decent terms and conditions, ensure that art aligns with the priorities of local communities and that those who want it are able to pursue a life-long career in the arts (ACE, Let's Create, 2020).

Scope of ACE's work

25. Equity believes that ACE should consider the following to be critical to its scope and functions going forward:

Collaborating with others to drive regional growth in the performing arts and entertainment

26. To maximise the contribution of the creative industries to the government's objective of economic growth, and to realise the ambitions of a creative industries industrial strategy, we urgently need deeper integration between providers of public funding to the arts and entertainment, including the UK arts councils, public service broadcasters and screen agencies.

27. Often ACE can regard itself as the principal arts funder in an area, but this fails to account for the vital role that local government plays in underpinning local arts and entertainment in places. Whether in relation to Oldham Coliseum, or Nottingham Playhouse, Equity has witnessed several examples where better co-ordination between ACE and a local authority would have had a positive impact on local arts and entertainment provision.

28. ACE plays a crucial supply-side role across England's live performance sector. Its funding is vital to thousands of productions, providing significant job opportunities for creative workers across the country. It is essential that ACE collaborates with other arts and entertainment funders and commissioning bodies towards place-based strategies for the arts and entertainment in every region.

Democratising the performing arts and entertainment

29. It is very concerning that there continues to be no significant workforce representation across ACE's governance structures. The performing arts and entertainment sectors have unusually high levels of trade union density for the private sector and significant coverage by trade union collective agreements. ACE itself is committed to funding work on industry-standard terms and conditions. Despite the success of our sector's industrial model, which has supported both investment and dignity at work for nearly a century, there is no trade union representation on ACE's National Council or any of the Area Councils. The lack of collective workforce voice is a major gap in oversight, and likely a contributing factor in recent poor governance and decision-making.

30. Equity wishes to see a renewal of ACE's regional governance structure, with the replacement of ACE's Area Councils with new Regional Arts Boards (RABs) composed of regional and local government officials, workforce representatives from all relevant local sectors (i.e. opera, dance, theatre etc.), community or audience representatives, local producers and regional ACE officials. Decision-making about the allocation of funding for each funding stream should be guided by RABs working in partnership with local and regional governments and the wider creative cluster to co-ordinate and monitor funding decisions at a regional level and collaborate towards good growth and good artistic works in the industry locally. This would ensure that the workforce who understand the art forms

and local communities can influence funding decisions and support decisions to be made on artistic merit.

Addressing narrowing class representation in the performing arts and entertainment

31. The second object of ACE's charter rightly seeks to increase the accessibility of the arts. Equity believes that broadening opportunities for and increasing the accessibility of sustainable artistic careers is a necessary step to achieving this object. For example, the last few decades have witnessed a dramatic decline in working class performers and creatives (Creative PEC, 2023). This is the result of precarious terms and conditions in our industries, combined with the high costs of access. It in turn narrows the scope of stories that are told, too often meaning that working class audiences do not see their experiences accurately reflected on stage. In achieving this, it would be appropriate for the charter to include explicit reference to increasing the accessibility and sustainability of a career in the arts for anyone.
32. Adding explicit mention of ACE's role in supporting the creation of art as well as increasing the accessibility of careers in the arts aligns with ACE's role as the development organisation for arts and culture, as well as with the government's aim to support the creative industries as a growth-driving sector (UK Government, 2024).

Public funding for the arts

33. Most evidence shows that public funding is the essential lifeblood of the arts and entertainment. There are few examples of successful strategies that rely on private finance or patronage. Equity would be concerned about the effect an increased reliance on private support for the arts could have on freedom of artistic expression.
34. Across local, national, and arts council budgets, the overall quantum of funding in arts budgets has steadily been declining for two decades, and Equity is aware that ACE is operating on an ever-decreasing budget. Our European neighbours spend an average of 0.5% of GDP on the arts and culture. According to the House of Commons library, the UK spends around 0.2% of GDP on our sectors, this puts us among the lowest levels of public investment in Europe. At the same time, analysis by the House of Commons library shows that over £1bn of local government funding for the arts has been cut since 2010, further reducing the investment in the arts and culture across England.
35. Equity is calling on the UK government to set out a roadmap for reaching the European average of investing 0.5% of GDP in the arts and culture. This would support the ambitions of an industrial strategy for the creative industries and maximise the contribution that the performing arts and entertainment can contribute to UK growth.

36. MyCake analysis of a constant cohort of 2,800 arts and culture organisations across the country (including National Portfolio Organisations) that filed accounts each year since 2018 shows a combined deficit of £117.8m in 2023 (Puffett, 2024). This is a marked deterioration of the financial health of the arts and culture sector compared with 2022 when, despite contending with the ongoing impact of the Covid pandemic, they were collectively £152.4m in profit. This analysis should raise significant concerns about the current effectiveness of ACE as a development agency. Equity is calling for an urgent government review of financial health in the sector.
37. Equity understands that ACE's income from the National Lottery has remained static since 2020 (Arts Council England, 2025).
38. As detailed above, the effects of low levels of funding in the arts are compounded for many of Equity's members by the inadequacy of support from the social security system. The Government's plans to further reduce this support through cuts to health and disability support will be devastating to Equity members and those in the wider arts and culture sector who rely on this support.

ACE stake in the success of projects

39. Where ACE funding supports the development of a project, ACE should share in its successes. This would ensure that new artistic works which are successful would generate some returns for ACE. Returns generated by companies in the 'Institutional' funding stream should be shared across the network of other Nationals, providing some redistribution between regions. Returns from the 'Projects' stream could be reinvested in other projects.

6.	<i>What is important to you in the Let's Create strategy?</i>
7.	<i>In what ways would you wish to enhance the strategy?</i>

40. The Let's Create strategy, and associated funding criteria, has resulted in funding being directed away from the creation and production of art and towards back-office and non-production work to fulfil the demands of commercialisation and outreach that funding is levied on for NPOs. Equity strongly believes that the resources of creative institutions should be put into producing high quality artistic works. Perpetual grant applications, and an emphasis on outreach infrastructure has diminished resources directly available for artistic productions over time. The long-term funding settlements and federalised structure of anchor institutions in our funding proposals would allow for more funding to be channelled towards producing high-quality art and providing creative jobs on industry standard terms and conditions.

41. Additionally, there is no mention in Let's Create of creating and producing theatrical productions. As current funding criteria is closely linked with the strategy, this naturally deprioritises the creation of new works of art resulting in significant reductions across the creative industries and jobs available for creative professionals.
42. Equity welcomes the strategy's aim of creating 'a creative and cultural country' through focus on the professional cultural sector and ACE's recognition of the crucial role that the publicly funded cultural sector plays in nurturing talent across the country. Equity is clear that ACE funding criteria should continue to include an insistence that any worker engaged in ACE funded work is done so on industry standard terms and conditions. ACE must also improve the enforcement and accountability mechanisms built into its processes that can ensure that this requirement is fulfilled, guaranteeing that work in creative industries is of the highest quality.
43. Equity is committed to campaigning for environmental responsibility across the creative industries and believes that this is an important element of the Let's Create strategy. As above, a benefit to the federalised structure described under our proposals is that anchor institutions could develop a shared directory of available sets and resources that could be shared amongst institutions as self-produced work is toured between anchor institutions. This would mean that touring productions could be undertaken more sustainably, allowing set pieces and costumes to be re-used and shared with appropriate consideration of designers' intellectual property. Environmental responsibility requirements should be proportionate to the funding applied for, i.e. the criteria for National anchor institutions should be different to those for project applications.
44. We welcome the aims in Let's Create to create cultural communities and believe that our suggested changes to the way that ACE operates would meet this objective. By having decisions made on a regional basis in reflection of the wants of that community, this alleviates the pressure to prove community connections in applications for project grants which are often difficult for freelancers to make as part of the current funding requirements and are open to being manipulated by some producers.

8.	<i>Arts Council England is the development agency for arts and creativity – How effective is it in delivering this role? What does it do well and what could it improve?</i>
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45. As highlighted above, there is no mention in the Let's Create strategy of creating and producing works of art, whether that is in theatre, opera, film, music, comedy, dance or any number of other areas that come under the umbrella of arts and creativity. This has had a significant impact on the quantity of work being produced in theatres across the country.

46. The performing arts and entertainment industry still lacks universally inclusive practices leading to decreased representation across the workforce as people from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds are excluded. Since the 1970s, the number of working-class actors, musicians and writers has shrunk by half making up just 16% of the workforce. The latest ACE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion report showed that Black, Asian and ethnically diverse workers made up 13% of the workforce, this compares to 17.2% for the general population (ACE, 2024). As well as this, research has found that the nature of the industry makes work inaccessible for those with caring responsibilities. Disabled people make up nearly a quarter (24%) of the UK population but are severely unrepresented in the creative workforce.
47. Funding for the costs associated with access costs for disabled workers and those with caring responsibilities should come from a separate budget to funding for project costs. The current arrangement where costs come from the same budget naturally disadvantages inclusive and representative projects.
48. The criteria for accessing funding as an anchor institution should include a requirement to produce new work. Removing the requirement for institutions to re-apply to be a part of the National Portfolio every three years means that not only can funds be redirected from the grant application process to the creation of art, but longer-term funding stability would mean that institutions would be more certain of their future funding position. As institutions often set their program years in advance, having certainty over future funding would allow them to be more comfortable in taking the risks associated with producing in house. The regional federalised structure within the Institutional framework aims to create, in the long-term, regional creative ecosystems in which these self-produced projects can then be commissioned, produced and toured between different anchor institutions across the country, creating jobs for local creative workers.
49. Additionally, funding allocations in the Projects stream should be made on artistic merit with decisions made by Regional Arts Boards containing representation from the artist workforce based in that region. This will contribute to the develop of new art and artists that has genuine artistic merit and reflects the demands of the community.
50. Arts funding decisions are currently highly centralised and lack transparency and accountability. NPO funding is published with little explanation or analysis and major decisions, such as cutting all funding to a regional producing theatre, are not adequately reasoned or justified in public materials. We believe reforms to ACE's regional governance structure could help to improve the diversity of organisations and art forms that receive funding. Regional Arts Board oversight of decisions would introduce more democratic accountability to decision making and improve transparency.

51. A place-based ACE funding approach which focuses on growing regional creative clusters will begin to create labour markets for the local artistic workforce. Equity hopes that over time this will provide sustainable careers for artists and creatives in every region of the UK, gradually eroding the necessity of moving to London to pursue an artistic career.
52. Equity believes that ACE-supported 'outreach' programmes should be directed to supporting this aim – delivering activities which build local talent pipelines in creative clusters in every region.

10.	<i>What should ACE's role be in promoting and supporting technological innovation across the arts and culture sectors, and can you share any thoughts on its visibility in this regard?</i>
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53. Equity believes that the promotion and shaping of technological innovation across the arts and culture sectors should be an artistic decision made by the creative professionals that work in that sector. ACE's role in shaping this innovation should be minimal, and restricted to the funding criteria and decision-making process that we have set out above. Funding decisions for project grants should be made on the basis of artistic merit and eligibility decisions for anchor institutions should be made according to the set criteria.

13.	<i>If you would like to provide further information on ACE's grant application process, please do so here:</i>
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54. Feedback from Equity's members highlights the value of receiving ACE funding for supporting creative professionals to make, produce and showcase their work, with several members noting that without ACE funding they would not have been able to have the careers in the arts and cultural sector that they have. Our members have highlighted that being able to say that their work was funded by ACE gave a sense of legitimacy and that they were being taken seriously. Equity members have expressed that the ACE staff that they have come into contact with during the application process have been well intentioned and as helpful as possible within the constraints of the process.
55. At present, however, ACE's processes and systems are not fit for purpose. Members tell Equity that the grant application process is difficult to navigate, that too much information is requested in relation to small amounts of funding and that feedback on both successful and unsuccessful applications is opaque, inconsistent and often irrelevant. Members have highlighted that it is often not clear why one project has been granted funding while another has been rejected and members who have navigated the process through several unsuccessful applications before receiving funding tell us that the feedback they receive on

their applications can be difficult to implement or irrelevant, often amounting to simply being told that other projects were preferred.

56. As above, there is a perception that funding decisions are made with a lack of knowledge of the industry, in particular of smaller areas of the industry such as circus, drag and other variety disciplines. Members have also highlighted that having to provide the same information regardless of art form means that often incomparable art forms are judged in comparison to each other and, therefore, that decisions based on artistic merit cannot realistically be made. This lack of knowledge means that funding decisions cannot be made on artistic merit in these areas, which is why Equity recommends that our proposed decision-making bodies in the new system – Regional Arts Boards – must include representation from the workforce who understand the areas that grants are being considered in.

57. Members have also told us that the level of information required in applications for a project grant, particularly for smaller sums of money, is far too high, putting freelancers at a significant disadvantage when applying for funding against organisations with the funds to employ professional grant writers and dedicate significant time to making multiple re-applications.

For example, Equity members told us:

‘Having to fill in the same form regardless of type of project, amount up to £30k, and art form is not appropriate at all’

‘It is a hugely unfair system that we compete for the same funds as organisations who have salaried professionals making their applications. I have been successful, but it involved many hours, arguably a full week at least, of unpaid labour in my limited spare time’

58. This issue is compounded for those from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds who cannot afford to hire a professional bid-writer to put together their application. Equity’s own research has highlighted that members have to undertake 12 hours of unpaid work a week just as part of looking for work (Equity, 2024), with members reporting that applying for ACE funding can take several days, during which time they are not able to take up paid work, artists who cannot afford to hire a professional, or take long-periods without working, are at a significant disadvantage.

59. The length of time that applications can take for those who cannot afford to employ professional grant writers, combined with the criteria’s emphasis on match funding, locks out applicants from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds who simply cannot afford to take repeated periods of time away from paid work to complete multiple applications

for funding. The emphasis on match funding additionally disadvantages those without established connections who can put this funding or in-kind support forward, meaning that applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds are further locked out from accessing funding that they need.

60. Additionally, several members have told us that the application process is inaccessible for disabled people. Members tell us that the application software is not fit for purpose and that navigating it difficult for some disabled people. Members report that that when seeking a support worker from ACE for their application due to disability, their experiences have been mixed. Compounding this, the fact that costs associated with access requirements are funded from the same budget as overall project funding makes it significantly harder for work led by and involving disabled people to get adequate funding.

61. In order to improve the efficacy and efficiency of ACE's processes and systems, Equity recommends that Regional Arts Boards – our proposed decision-makers – work with relevant stakeholders to improve the application and reporting processes in several ways. For instance, the complexity and intensity of an application should be commensurate with the size of the potential grant. The Project Funding stream should therefore require significantly less time and effort on the part of applicants, as compared to the Institutional Funding stream. ACE should also adopt fundamental accessibility principles regarding its own content, as well as that required of applicants and grant-partners.

62. As a part of the changes to the funding structure, Equity is also calling for funding for the costs of access arrangements, costs associated with making creative work accessible for parents and carers and other costs associated with increasing access to creative work to come from a separate funding pot from the institutional or project-based funding streams. The current arrangement where this funding is included in the overall budget for funding work naturally disincentivises work that aims to be inclusive and disadvantages those with access needs that incur additional costs.

17.	<i>What, if anything, do you think ACE could do to better measure and communicate its impact?</i>
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63. As ACE provides significant job opportunities for creative workers across the country, it should improve its impact monitoring metrics to include the size, location and composition of the creative workforce both across the country and in regions. This could be achieved through the adoption of a standard industry monitoring form for the workforce. The data collected would enable ACE – as well as relevant stakeholders, including Equity – to identify gaps, measure progress and improve outcomes.

64. ACE's impact metrics should include consideration of industrial relations, with measures for success including continually improving terms and conditions for creative workers including pay, which should see the average earnings of Equity members rise from its current figure of £15,300 to ensure that professional work is professionally paid.
65. In addition, ACE should measure its progress in nurturing regional creative clusters through monitoring per-head funding for artists in regions and mapping of 'arts deserts'. This would enable ACE to identify the areas of England in most need of its support. One measure of success would be the growth of flourishing artistic communities outside of London.
66. ACE should commit to making funding decisions that reflect the principles of the social value model of procurement. It is also essential that ACE staff have the necessary skills to undertake audits based on these principles and to ensure that proposed terms and conditions of work that ACE is funding are in line with industry standards, as ACE is committed to.
67. ACE's funding focus should be on the production of work, on decent terms and conditions for artists. ACE -should stop funding organisations who do not advance these objectives.
68. Equity understands that grant-making institutions should seek to establish an appropriate balance between maintaining support for existing partners and creating new funding relationships. In all cases, exiting responsibly is essential to nurturing a sustainable ecosystem. We would urge ACE to adopt best practice in this area, including by: communicating clearly about expectations and intentions throughout the term of a grant; providing significant advance notice about an end in funding; and offering tie-off grants.
69. Let's Create makes no mention of creating and producing theatrical productions. As current funding criteria is closely linked with the Let's Create strategy, this naturally deprioritises the creation of new works of art, resulting in significant reductions across the creative industries and jobs available for creative professionals.
70. This, compounded by significantly decreased funding levels, has led to sharp declines in 'actor weeks' – the total number of FTE weeks of work offered to performers by each individual institution. To take one example, between 2017 – 2024, the total number of annual actor weeks at Bolton Octagon has fallen from 475 to 306 – a decrease of 36%. At the same time, the average weekly salary at Bolton Octagon has also fallen from £875.46 to £495.13. In Opera, funding has declined significantly, leaving houses unable to tour and resulting in workers being threatened with pay cuts. This is a devastating

decline in work, which will push local creative workers out of the labour market, increase the reliance on London labour, and damage the local economy. ACE should measure the Actor Weeks that its funding generates on union terms and conditions and how it mitigates the impact of any cuts to funding on actor weeks.

71. There are clear ramifications of this for the quantity of self-produced work being performed in theatres across the country. A report commissioned by Nottingham Playhouse highlighted that between 2013/14 and 2023/24, self-produced performances across 10 organisations had decreased by 37% (Nottingham Playhouse, 2024).

19.	<i>Are there ways that ACE could improve engagement and responsiveness to local communities?</i>
	<i>ACE's relationship with stakeholders</i>

72. Please see our answers to previous questions for more detail on this area. As detailed above, the lack of universally inclusive practices and increasing inaccessibility of careers in the creative industries across the performing arts and entertainment has led to decreased representation across the workforce.

73. The performing arts and entertainment sectors are highly unionised, with up to 80% membership density in some parts of our industry. Unions have access to significant sections of the workforce living and working in communities across England. It is shocking therefore that trade unions remain so poorly represented in ACE's structures.

74. We are also concerned by ACE's recent approach to the Opera sector. The lack of an initial Opera strategy, combined with some very poor decision-making around the relocation of the English National Opera has done significant damage to the sector. ACE's introduction of an 'Opera and Musical Theatre Analysis' further confused matters, by combining two very different sectors into one programme. This suggested a poor understanding of the arts ecosystem.

75. In Equity's view, a democratic ACE, which is locally embedded and accountable to the communities it serves, would go a long way towards improving the Council's relationship with its stakeholders. As set out above, Equity believes in an arts funding and decision-making model that is more inclusive of all participants and responds to the interests and needs of local communities. Regional Arts Boards should play an important role here.

76. As a trade union, Equity is of course principally concerned with ACE's relationship with our members – the creative workforce that powers the industry. As above, Equity welcomes the aim in 'Let's Create' of creating 'a creative and cultural country' through focus on the

professional cultural sector and ACE’s recognition of the crucial role that the publicly funded cultural sector plays in nurturing talent across the country. Equity is clear that ACE funding criteria should continue to include an insistence that any worker engaged in ACE funded work is done so on industry standard terms and conditions. ACE must also improve the enforcement and accountability mechanisms built into its processes that can ensure that this requirement is fulfilled, guaranteeing that work in creative industries is of the highest quality.

77. The proposals that we have set out include inbuilt accountability mechanisms to ensure that National anchor institutions funded under the Institutional stream are meeting the criteria expected of them. These criteria should be ambitious and hold institutions to account for creating high-quality art and jobs on industry standard terms and conditions which increase overall access to art for everyone.

78. Finally, as above ACE should strive to improve workforce voice and representation across its governance structures and processes.

	<i>Levels of government involvement in ACE</i>
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79. Equity is clear that ACE should restore and maintain its status as an arms-length body. In 2024, Arts Council England published a deeply concerning statement warning that ‘political statements’ in artistic works could result in funding being denied or removed. Equity’s freedom of information request to ACE and DCMS strongly suggested that this statement was the result of meetings between ACE and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in relation to the conflict in Israel-Palestine. Equity remains extremely concerned that ACE has been subject to significant political interference. We believe that ACE should have the authority and independence to make funding decisions based exclusively on artistic merit and the criteria that it sets out. Central government should have no role in attempting to shape these decisions to meet political aims.

80. Restoration of the independence of ACE should come hand in hand with an increase in funding to ensure that it can act with authority as an arms-length public body to fund and develop art and artists based on merit and not as dictated by government. As acknowledged in its Invest 2035 strategy, the creative industries already generate a significant income for the country and are a growth priority for the government (UK Government, 2024). Properly funding ACE would be a logical step towards achieving the aims of supporting the creative industries to thrive.

81. In developing a coherent, place-based industrial strategy, one which includes a focus on national and regional arts and entertainment growth through creative clusters, it is vital that ACE coordinates meaningfully with national arts councils across the UK, to consider overlaps, and share best practice.

26.	<i>What is the biggest challenge facing the arts and cultural sector in the next 10 years?</i>
27.	<i>What are the most important things Arts Council England should focus on?</i>
28.	<i>What changes would you like to see regarding ACE?</i>

82. There are several key challenges facing the arts and culture sector over the next decade including, but not limited to, continually increasing costs, significantly reduced funding levels across arts and culture, the threat of artificial intelligence companies scraping artists and performers' data to train generative AI models which takes payment away from those artists and performers and reduces work available to them in the future, increasing political turbulence and increasing censorship of artists' work.

83. In tackling some of these challenges, Equity is calling on ACE to focus on a long-term strategy for funding allocation that seeks to reinvigorate regional artistic ecosystems, increase the volume of new work being produced in England and increase the accessibility of a lifelong career in the arts and cultural sector for everyone.

84. Equity has elaborated above on the changes that we would like to see regarding ACE, please see our response to previous questions for more detail.