

# 1,243 Voices: Live Performance Artists' Experiences of Covid-19

November 2021




**JERWOOD  
ARTS**

## Report Commissioner

# JERWOOD ARTS

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Jerwood Arts is the leading independent funder dedicated to supporting UK artists, curators, and producers to develop and thrive.

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## Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic was declared, live performance as we knew it effectively shut down. Venues went dark, long-planned shows and tours were cancelled, and the working lives of artists, creatives, and producers whose practice focused and relied on live performance suddenly looked radically different. Yet for all we know about what changed for the music and performing arts sector as a result of Covid-19, there remains limited evidence about what these changes meant for the lives and livelihoods of the people within it.

This report presents the findings of a survey of early-career artists, creatives, and producers based across the UK, whose practices pre-Covid had focused and relied on live performance, about their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey asked how Covid-19 had affected their artistic/creative practice and livelihood, what financial and non-financial support they had been able to access throughout the pandemic, and whether they saw a future for themselves in the sector beyond Covid-19.

The survey was conducted between October and November 2020, drawing on applicants to the Live Work Fund, a Covid-19 response fund delivered by Jerwood Arts in partnership with Wolfson Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and The Linbury Trust. This £660,000 fund aimed to support early-career artists, creatives, and producers to adapt their approach to making and sharing live work. The Live Work Fund applicant survey received 1,243 responses from artists representing a wide range of backgrounds, circumstances, and identities, and from every nation and region of the UK. A full breakdown of the respondents can be found the Appendix.

The findings of this survey reveal the struggles of working artists during Covid-19, particularly as a result of the crushing effects of the pandemic on their creative activity, professional opportunities, and finances. At the same time, they remind us of artists' adaptability and resilience by highlighting the myriad ways in which artists pivoted their practice and found creative ways to keep working and making an income during the toughest of times. Finally, this research offers a small glimmer of hope: despite the challenges and the devastating impact of the pandemic, the majority of artists could not see themselves abandoning their artistic/creative practice.

This report paints a picture of the working lives of artists during Covid-19. In so doing, it aims to fill the gap in our understanding of the impact of the pandemic on the individual artists, creatives, and producers across the music and performing arts sector. It also offers important context for our separate report about live performance artists' hopes for a post-Covid future,<sup>1</sup> which is based on responses from the same survey, by providing an insight into their working circumstances, conditions, and psyche at the time of the research.

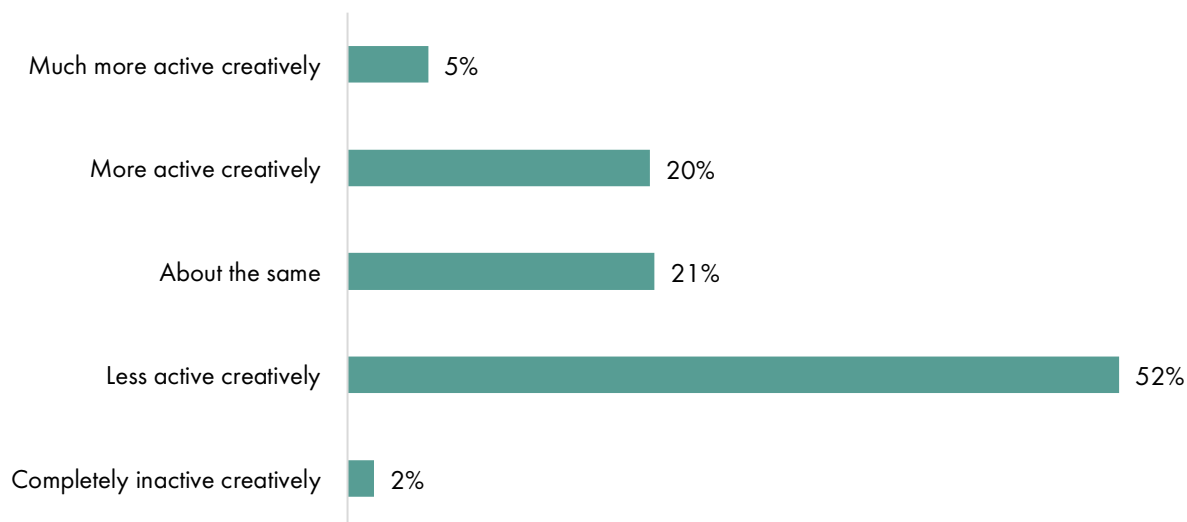
We are hugely grateful to all the applicants who took the time to respond to this survey and help inform our understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on the working lives of freelance artists. We appreciate the trust that they have placed in us by sharing these responses, and we will aim to honour this trust by using the findings of this survey to shape our thinking about our work at Jerwood Arts. By using our platform to amplify their voices, we hope that we can help create a sector that is more responsive to their needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerwood Arts, *1,243 Voices: Live Performance Artists' Hopes for a Post-Covid Future*, <https://jerwoodarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Live-Performance-Artists-Hopes-for-a-Post-Covid-Future.pdf>.

# Impact on artistic/creative practice

Figure 1: Since Covid-19 began, I have been... (n=1236)

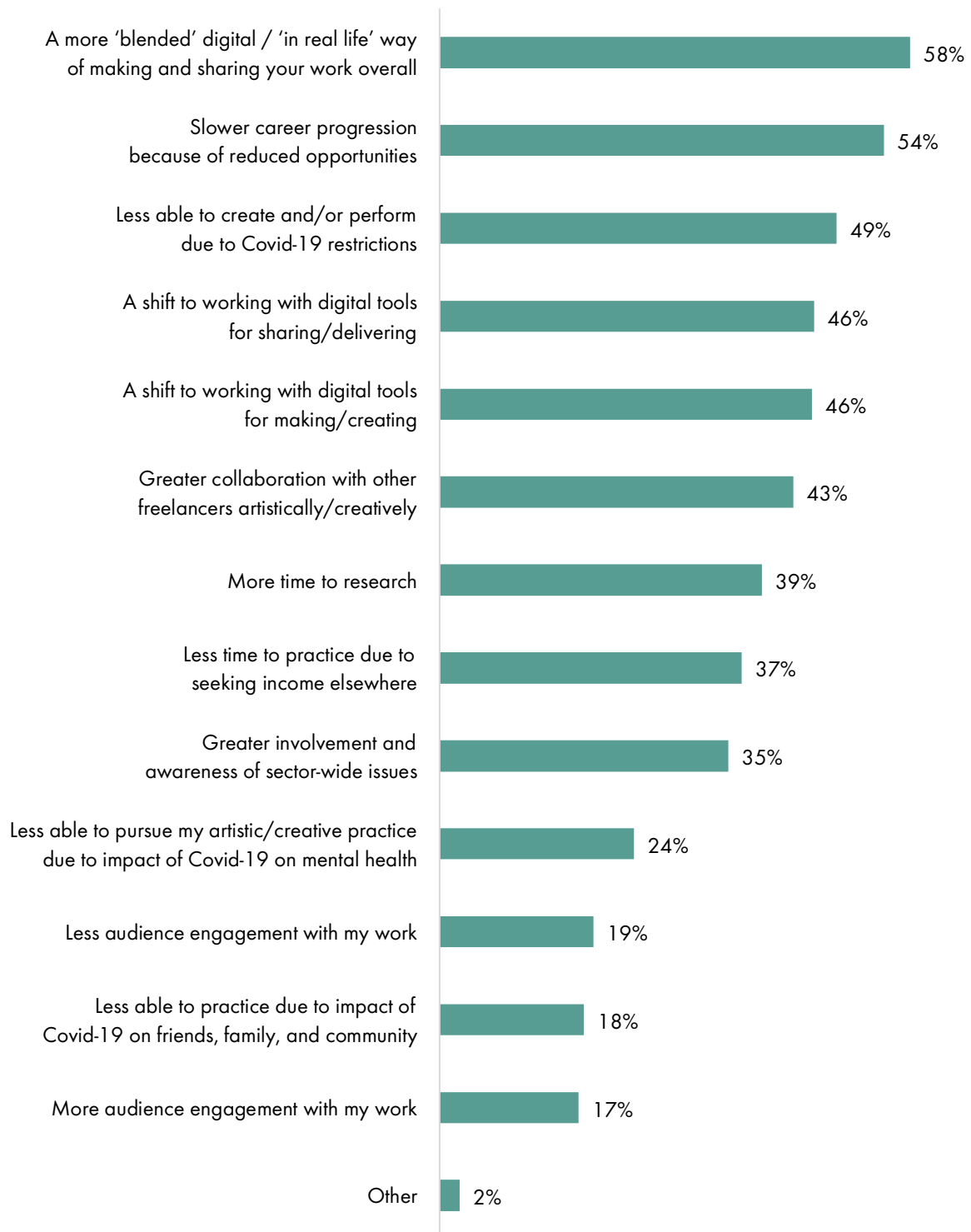


Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents reported that they had been less active creatively since the start of Covid-19 (52 per cent). A few had even stopped their creative practice entirely (2 per cent). In contrast, a smaller proportion of respondents had been more active (20 per cent) or much more active (5 per cent) creatively. Only 21 per cent of respondents reported that their level of creative activity had remained about the same.

There were some variations in levels of creative activity according to personal characteristics and circumstances. On the whole, artists aged 18 to 24 were more active creatively than their older peers, whereas artists with caring responsibilities were less active creatively than those without caring responsibilities. This is linked to the fact that younger artists were less likely to have caring responsibilities than older artists.

Meanwhile, artists who identified as disabled or having a long-term health condition were collectively less active creatively than those without a disability or long-term health condition. For those at higher risk of Covid-19 as a result of their disability or long-term health condition, it may be that they needed to take additional measures to protect themselves, which placed limitations on their ability to work.

**Figure 2: What do you think the current, and likely future, effects of Covid-19 will be on your artistic/creative practice? (n=1 223)**



Artists reported a wide range of ways in which Covid-19 had affected their practice or was likely to affect their practice in the future. The most common effect of Covid-19 was a more 'blended' way of making and sharing their work overall, bringing together elements of digital and 'in real life' practice (58 per cent). Along similar lines, large proportions of artists also reported a shift to

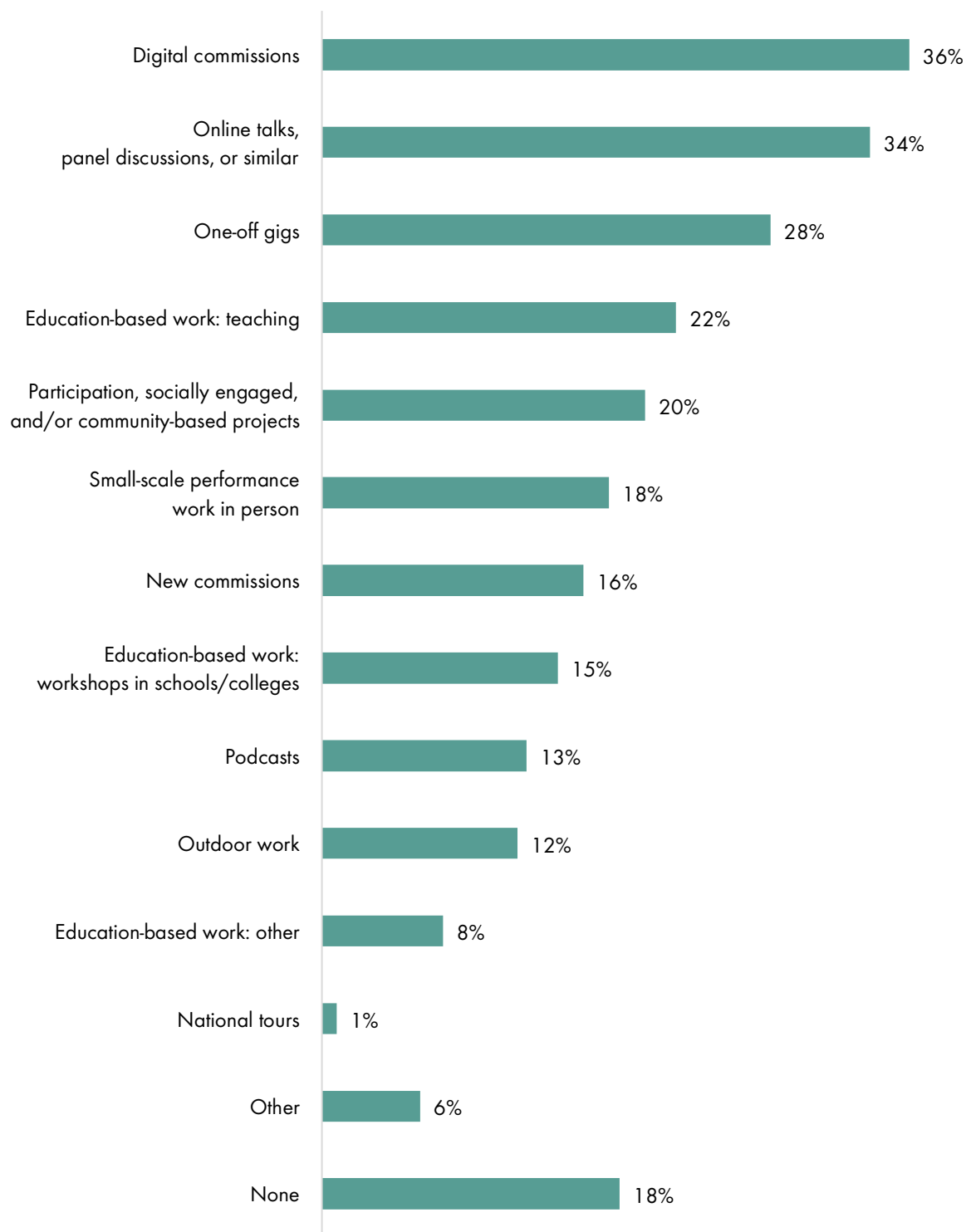
working with digital tools, both for sharing/delivering (46 per cent) and for making/creating (46 per cent).

The majority of artists also reported that they were experiencing or expected to experience slower career progression because of reduced career opportunities as a result of Covid-19 (54 per cent) and a reduced ability to create and/or perform due to Covid-19 restrictions (49 per cent). This echoes the above finding about their lower levels of creative activity since the start of the pandemic and suggests that artists are concerned about the longer-term implications of this reduced activity for their careers.

There was a mixed picture of the ways in which Covid-19 had affected artists' capacity. While Covid-19 had provided some benefits to their practice by allowing greater collaboration with other freelancers (43 per cent) and more time to research (39 per cent), in some cases, it had also hampered their work due to needing to seek income elsewhere (37 per cent), the impact of Covid-19 on their mental health (24 per cent), and the impact of Covid-19 on their friends, family, and community (18 per cent).

# Impact on professional opportunities

Figure 3: As some arts and cultural venues and organisations receive emergency funding, what kind of jobs and opportunities, if any, are you being offered now? (n=1200)





For artists who continued to find work within the sector during the pandemic, this work came in a variety of forms. The most common types of jobs and opportunities involved work that could be delivered remotely via technology: digital commissions (36 per cent) and online talks, panel discussions, or similar (34 per cent). Interestingly, only 13 per cent reported that they had been offered podcast work.

Learning and participation work was another common source of jobs and opportunities for artists, including teaching (22 per cent); participation, socially engaged, and/or community-based projects (20 per cent); workshops in schools/colleges (15 per cent); and other education-based work (8 per cent).

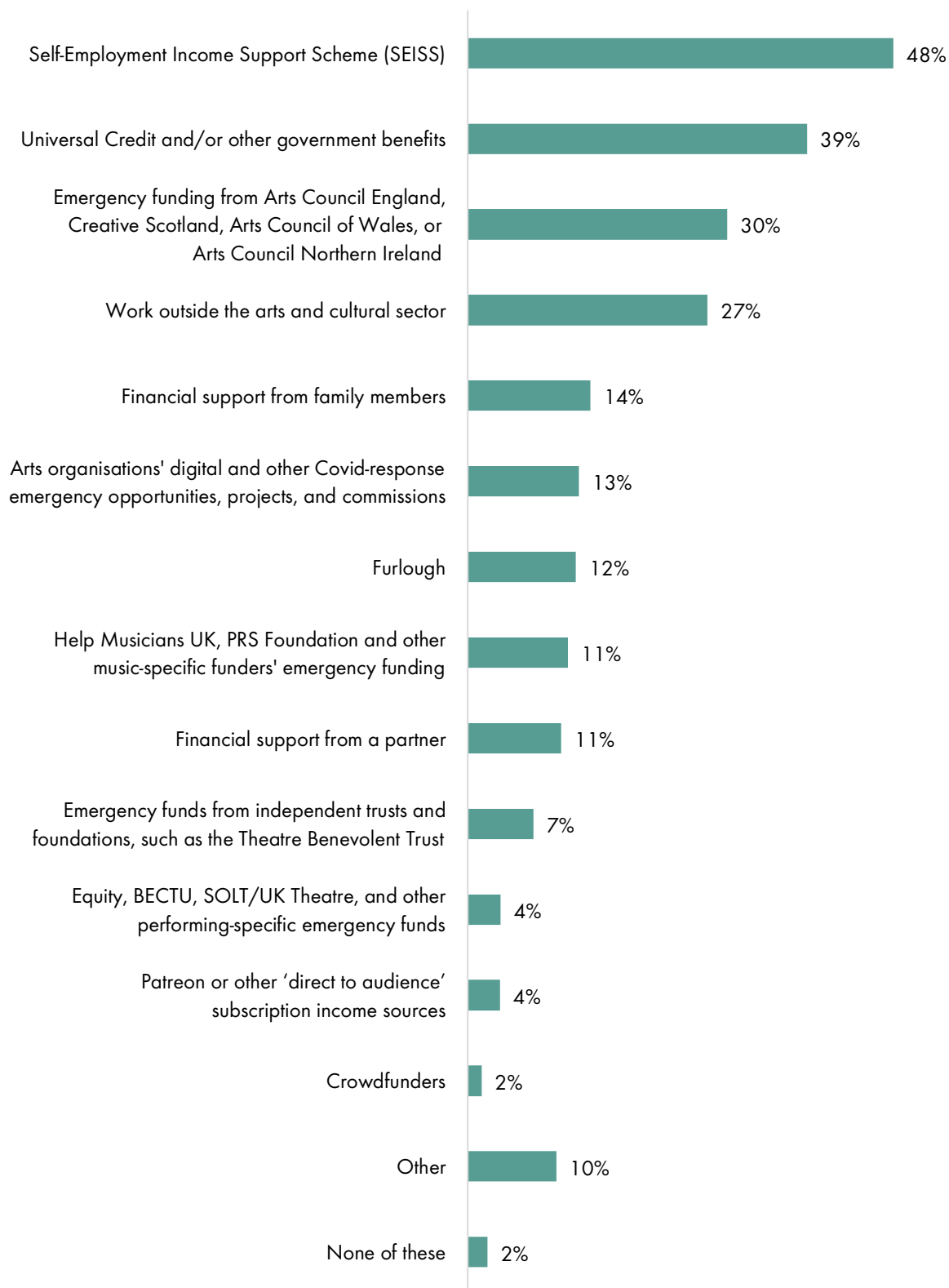
A smaller proportion of artists were offered jobs and opportunities relating to live performance, and the majority of this work aimed to deliver in Covid-safe ways, such as small-scale performance work in person (18 per cent) and outdoor work (12 per cent). Only 1 per cent of respondents reported receiving jobs and opportunities relating to national tours.

The appetite for new work during the pandemic appears to have been relatively low, as only 16 per cent of respondents reported receiving offers for new commissions. These responses were roughly evenly divided between those who also reported receiving digital commissions and those who had not received offers for digital commissions, suggesting that at least half of these new commissions were for live work.

Notably, while some artists continued to work throughout the pandemic, this work was not always stable: 28 per cent of respondents reported that they had received offers of one-off jobs and opportunities. Additionally, 18 per cent of respondents reported that they had not been offered any jobs or opportunities during the pandemic.

# Financial impact

Figure 4: Since Covid-19 began, my main income sources have been... (n=1203)



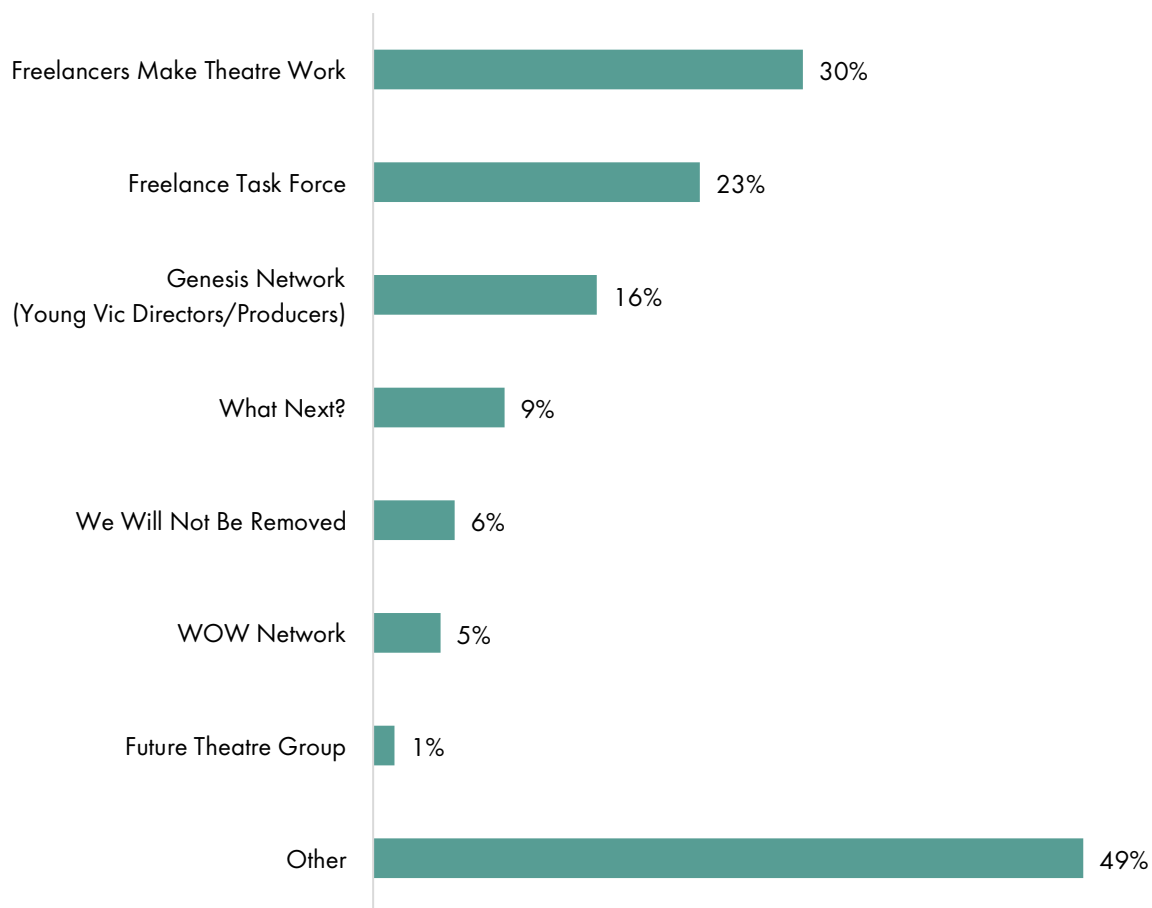
Government support played a central role in ensuring continued income for artists during the pandemic. Nearly half of respondents relied on the government's Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (48 per cent), while another 39 per cent accessed Universal Credit and/or other government benefits, and 12 per cent received furlough through the government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

A large number of artists also relied on emergency support from a range of sources across the sector, including the four national arts bodies (30 per cent); Covid-response opportunities, projects, and commissions (13 per cent); music-specific funders (11 per cent); independent trusts and foundations (7 per cent); and performing-specific emergency funds (4 per cent).

Over a quarter of artists had earned income since the start of the pandemic through work outside the arts and cultural sector (27 per cent), which often supplemented their income from other sources. Relatively few were able to rely on financial support from family members (14 per cent) or from a partner (11 per cent), and even fewer as their sole source of income during this time.

## Sources of support

Figure 5: Have you been involved in any support networks set up over the past 8 months? (n=406)



When asked about their involvement in any support networks since the onset of the pandemic, artists responded at a much lower rate than for any other question in the survey (33 per cent, compared to 93 per cent for the next-lowest response rate). This suggests that the low response rate for this question was likely due not to survey fatigue but to low interest in engaging with this question, most likely due to lack of engagement with any support networks during the pandemic.

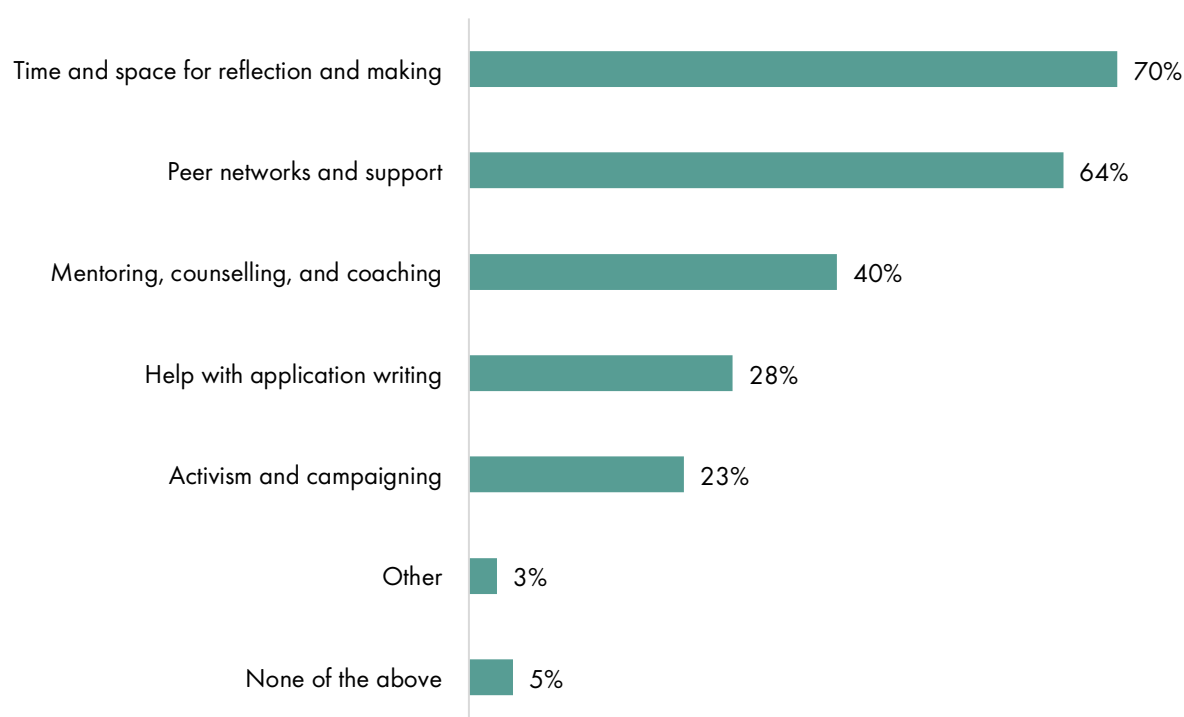
Among the named support networks, Freelancers Make Theatre Work (30 per cent), the Freelance Task Force (23 per cent), and the Genesis Network (16 per cent) were most commonly accessed. Over half of respondents engaged with at least one of these networks. Notably, all three of these networks mainly target workers in the theatre sector.

Other, less commonly accessed support networks included What Next? (9 per cent), Scene/Change (7 per cent), We Shall Not Be Removed (6 per cent), the WOW Network (5 per cent), and the Future Theatre Group (1 per cent).<sup>2</sup>

Nearly half of respondents reported that they had engaged with some other support network during the pandemic. These networks ranged widely in scope, composition, and formality. Many were informal peer networks and mutual support groups, typically organised around existing connections or a shared personal characteristic or professional identity (e.g. women of colour, freelance directors). They also included local or regional support groups, ranging from sector-specific networks to general freelancer support networks. These networks were often self-organised and maintained or facilitated via social media (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp).

A substantial number had also accessed more formal sources of support. These included drop-in sessions organised by arts organisations or venues, as well as networks and working groups organised through their trade union or another membership organisation.

**Figure 6: What have been the most important sources of non-financial support to you so far in navigating the impact of Covid-19 on your practice? (n=1 162)**



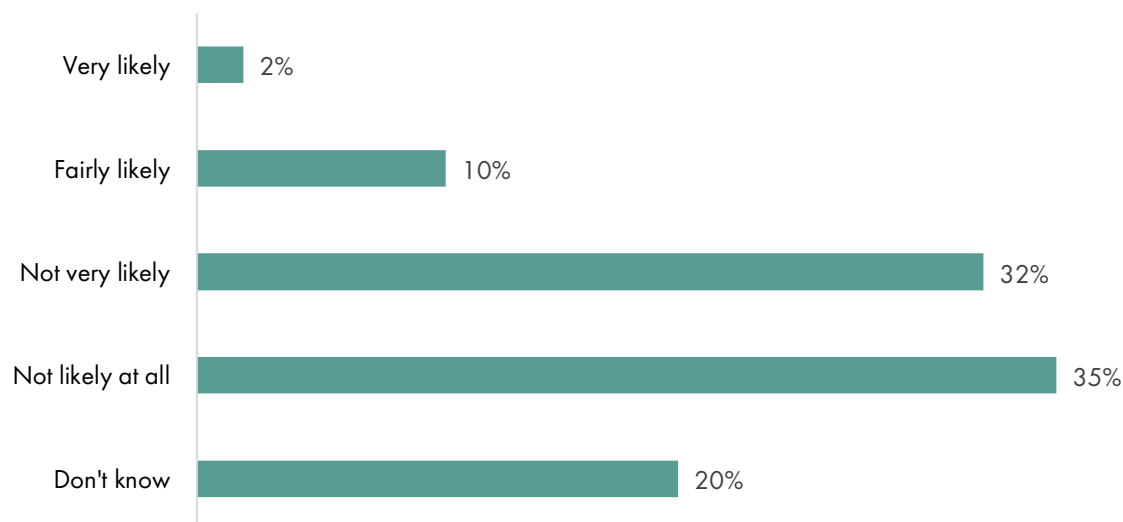
The two most important sources of non-financial support for artists in navigating the impact of Covid-19 on their practice were time and space for reflection and making (70 per cent) and peer networks and support (64 per cent). Notably, these came far ahead of more formal types of support such as mentoring, counselling, and coaching (40 per cent); help with application writing (28 per cent); and activism and campaigning (23 per cent).

<sup>2</sup> A small proportion of respondents also reported that they engaged with Scene/Change and/or Open Hire, although due to an error in the survey instrument, it is not possible to segment these responses, and they have been excluded from the analysis.

It is interesting that artists placed greater importance on time and space for reflection and writing, and peer networks and support than on more formal support mechanisms. While the survey did not ask why artists found these sources of support more important, possible reasons might include the greater weighting that they place on the intrinsic value of undertaking their practice and engaging with peers; the relative benefit of these types of support in comparison to more formal, extrinsic types of support; or even simply the greater availability of these types of support at the times that they were most needed.

## Their future in the sector

Figure 7: Based on your current sense of the future, how likely are you to abandon your artistic/creative practice because of the impact of Covid-19 on your livelihood? (n=1 198)



Despite the challenges that Covid-19 had presented to their livelihoods, the majority of respondents reported that that they were not very likely (32 per cent) or not likely at all (35 per cent) to abandon their artistic/creative practice in the future. A small proportion reported that they were fairly likely (10 per cent) or very likely (2 per cent) to abandon their practice because of the impact of Covid-19 on their livelihood. In comparison, The Big Freelancer Survey, a June 2020 survey of over 8,000 freelance theatre workers, found that 1 in 3 were likely to leave the theatre industry.<sup>3</sup> The lower likelihood of leaving among respondents to this survey may indicate a degree of selection bias: by virtue of surveying applicants to the Live Work Fund, the sample is likely biased toward those who are committed and able to continue their practice. Nonetheless, despite this bias, 20 per cent of respondents reported that they don't know how likely they are to abandon their artistic/creative practice, suggesting that it remains an open question for them.

Personal characteristics and circumstances had some impact on artists' likelihood of seeing themselves abandoning their practice due to the impact of Covid-19 on their livelihood. Most notably, artists aged 18 to 24 were far less likely than any other subgroup to see themselves abandoning their practice and held this position with the greatest conviction: nearly half said that they were not likely at all to abandon their practice. This presents a stark contrast to the findings of The Big Freelancer Survey, which suggest that early-career artists are the most likely to leave the sector.<sup>4</sup> Artists who identified as male were also more likely than their female or non-binary peers to say that they were not likely at all to abandon their practice.

<sup>3</sup> Freelancers Make Theatre Work, *Covid-19: Routes to Recovery; An Evidence-Based Study of the Freelance Theatre Workforce*, <https://freelancersmaketheatrework.com/study-routes-to-recovery>.

<sup>4</sup> Possible reasons for this discrepancy include the different subsectors and roles included within the two surveys, and changes in attitudes between the timing of the surveys as a result of evolving personal or external circumstances.

On the whole, artists who identified as disabled or having a long-term health condition were somewhat more likely to see themselves abandoning their practice and those without a disability or long-term health condition, and similarly for artists with caring responsibilities in comparison to those without caring responsibilities. However, these variations were less pronounced.



# About the Live Work Fund

## Live Work Fund 2021

The Live Work Fund was a new fund, worth £660,000, which has supported 33 exceptional individuals over 12 months with awards of £20,000 to adapt their approach to making and sharing live work. It was for artists, creatives, and producers with no more than 10 years' experience, based anywhere in the UK, whose practice pre-Covid-19 focused and relied on live performance. This included those with artistic/creative practices based in music, theatre, opera, circus, dance, live art, and performance, as well as those who worked in the gaps between these disciplines. Application was free, and the deadline was 16 November 2020. All applicants were notified by 10 December 2020, and awardees were announced in February 2021.

The Live Work Fund brought together Jerwood Arts, Wolfson Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and The Linbury Trust, four independent funders who shared a common aim to substantially support individuals whose work relied on live performance following the impact of Covid-19. They strongly believed that artists/creatives hold the key to discovering and forging new ways forward, and were committed to creating a vibrant future for live work and ensuring that right across the country outstanding artists, creatives, and producers were able to transform and develop their practice to survive and thrive.

The Live Work Fund was designed to help prevent exceptional talent of all backgrounds from abandoning their practice due to the impact of Covid-19 and create the space for reflection and experimentation. It provided substantial support throughout 2021 to enable the selected artists, creatives, and producers to take the time to think ambitiously about how they could adapt their artistic/creative practice and make a vital contribution to the future of their artistic/creative community.

Awardees have also been able to call upon Jerwood Arts' expert staff for advice and introductions; access a series of workshops; and connect with established artistic/creative mentors and other experts to support career development, answer discipline-specific questions, and signpost opportunities. Independent evaluation is currently underway, and reports will be available in 2022.

[www.jerwoodarts.org/projects/live-work-fund](http://www.jerwoodarts.org/projects/live-work-fund)

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## **Jerwood Arts**

Jerwood Arts is the leading independent funder dedicated to supporting outstanding UK artists/creatives, curators, and producers to develop and thrive. We collaborate with organisations across art forms to imagine a more sustainable sector. Our programmes provide transformative opportunities for early-career individuals through awards, fellowships, and commissions, and we present exhibitions in our gallery in London and on tour nationally.

[www.jerwoodarts.org](http://www.jerwoodarts.org)

## **Wolfson Foundation**

The Wolfson Foundation is an independent charity with a focus on research and education. Its aim is to support civil society by investing in excellent projects in science, health, heritage, humanities, and the arts.

Since it was established in 1955, some £1 billion (£2 billion in real terms) has been awarded to more than 11,500 projects throughout the UK, all on the basis of expert review.

[www.wolfson.org.uk](http://www.wolfson.org.uk)

## **Esmée Fairbairn Foundation**

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation aims to improve our natural world, secure a fairer future and strengthen the bonds in communities in the UK. We unlock change by contributing everything we can alongside people and organisations with brilliant ideas who share our goals.

The Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-makers in the UK. In 2019 we made grants of £36 million towards a wide range of work within the arts, children and young people, the environment and social change. We also have a £45 million allocation to social investments for organisations with the aim of creating social impact.

[www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk](http://www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk)

## **The Linbury Trust**

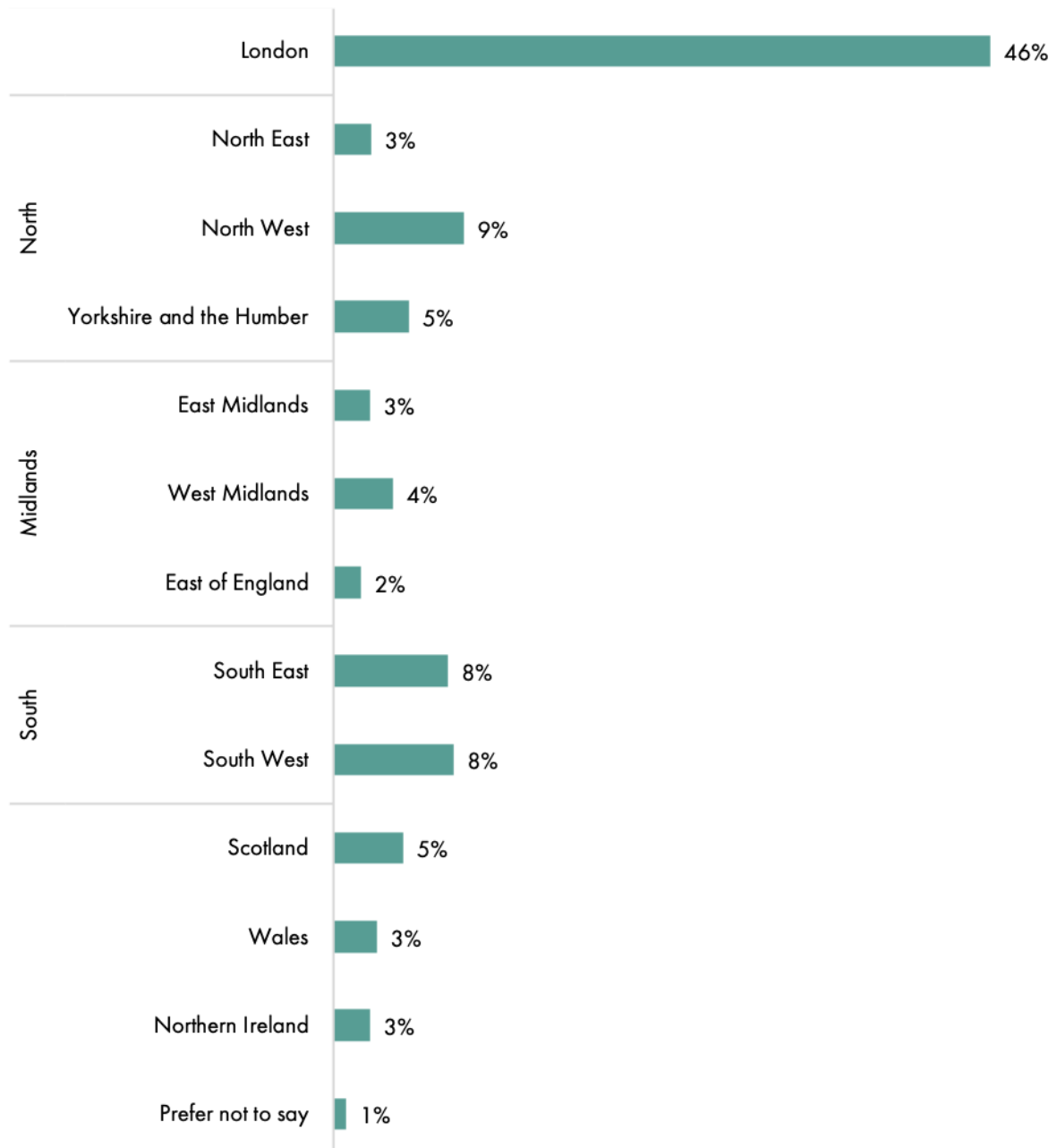
The Linbury Trust is an independent grant-making trust established in 1973 by Lord Sainsbury of Preston Candover, and his wife Anya, Lady Sainsbury CBE. The Trust supports a wide variety of compelling and exciting projects across the world in the fields of arts, heritage, and culture; the environment; and social and medical welfare.

[www.linburytrust.org.uk](http://www.linburytrust.org.uk)

# Appendix: Breakdown of respondents

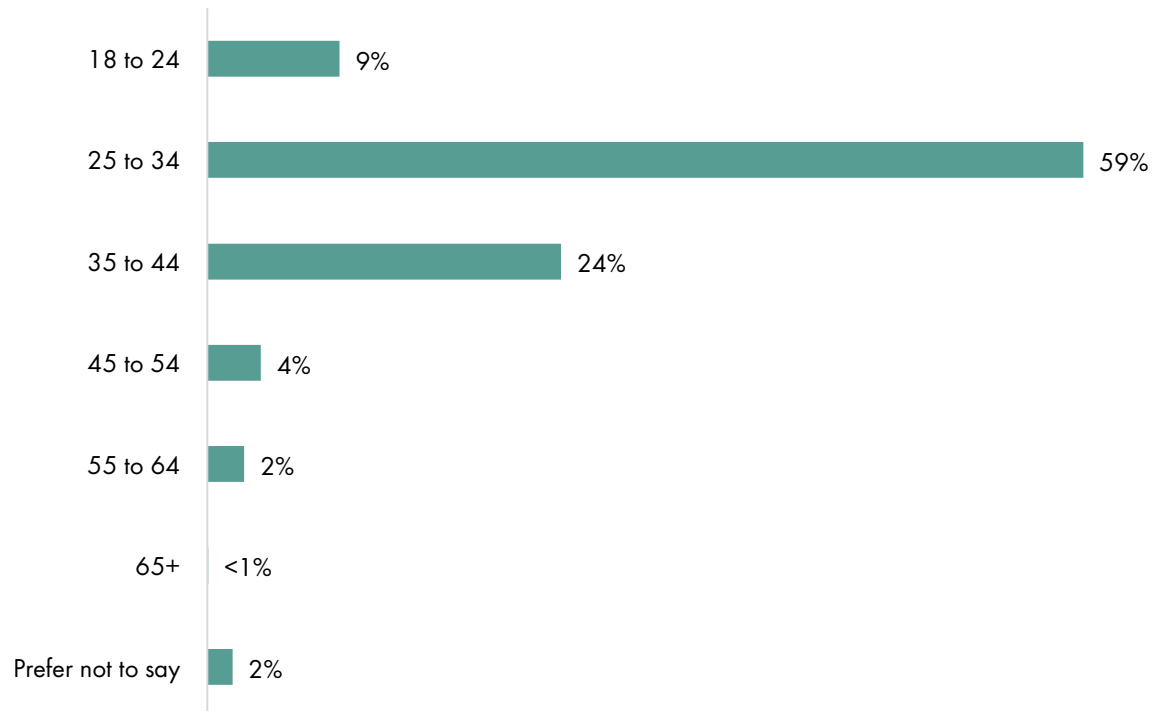
## Location

Figure A1: Where are you currently based? (n=1242)



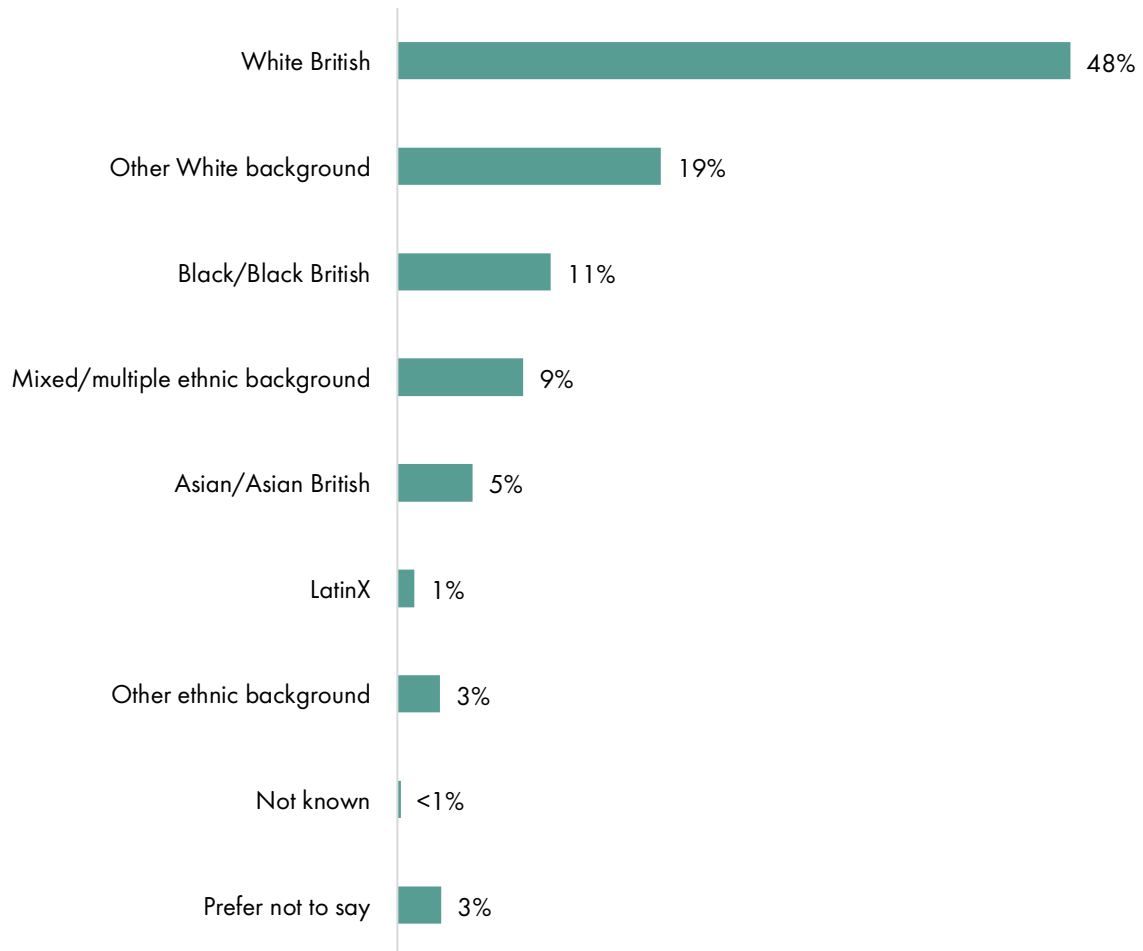
## Age

Figure A2: What is your age range? (n=1242)



## Ethnicity

Figure A3: What is your ethnicity?<sup>5</sup> (n=1242)



<sup>5</sup> Respondents were also offered the opportunity to self-describe, which 37 of them chose to do (3 per cent). These responses were coded according to the categories in this figure and are included within the breakdown provided.

## Disability or long-term health condition

Figure A4: Do you identify as disabled, or do you have a long-term health condition? (n=1241)

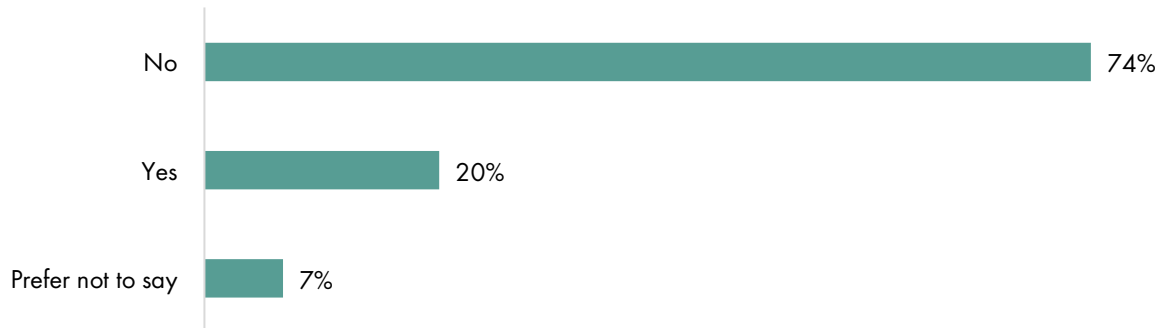
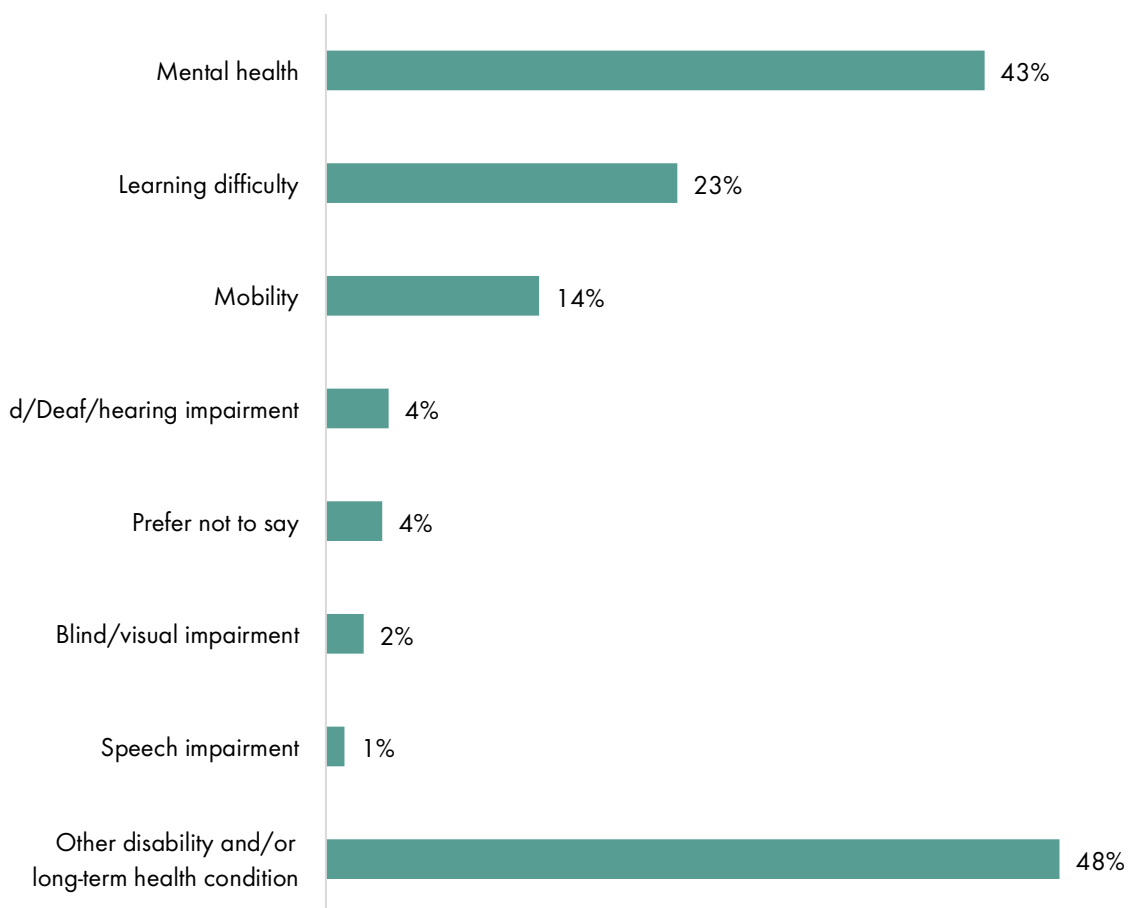


Figure A5: Breakdown of reported disabilities and long-term health conditions (n=243)



## Gender

Figure A6: How would you describe your gender? (n=1240)

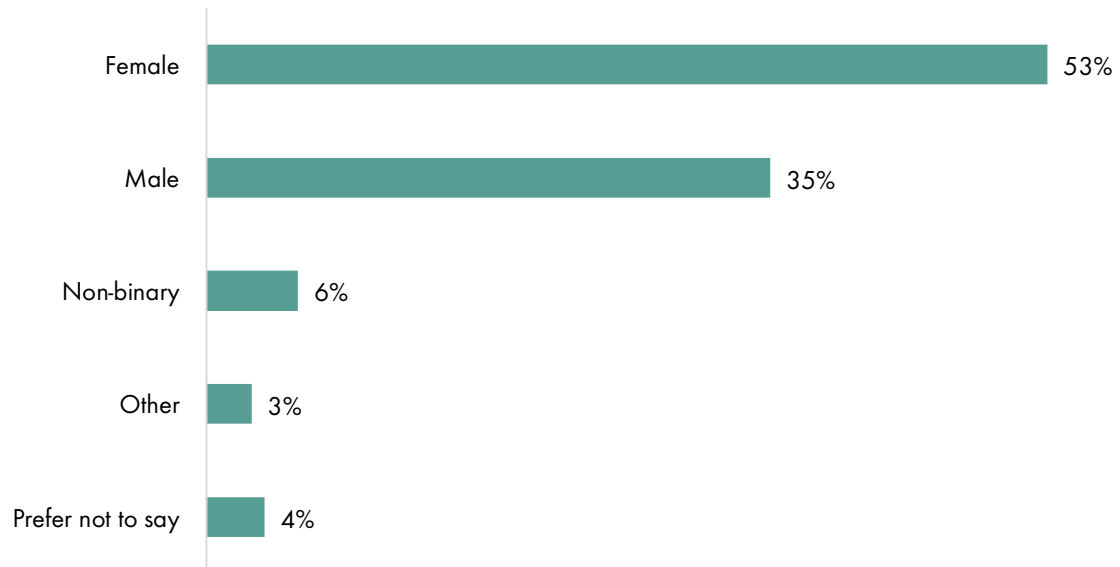
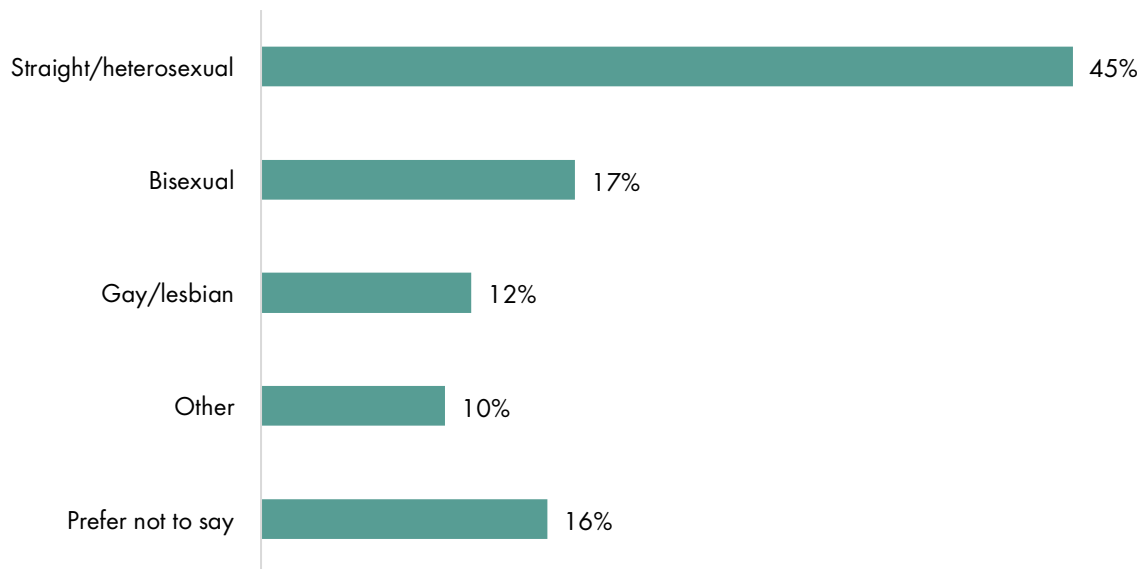


Figure A7: Is your gender identity the same as the one assigned to you at birth? (n=1237)



## Sexual orientation

Figure A8: How would you describe your sexual orientation?<sup>6</sup> (n=1237)



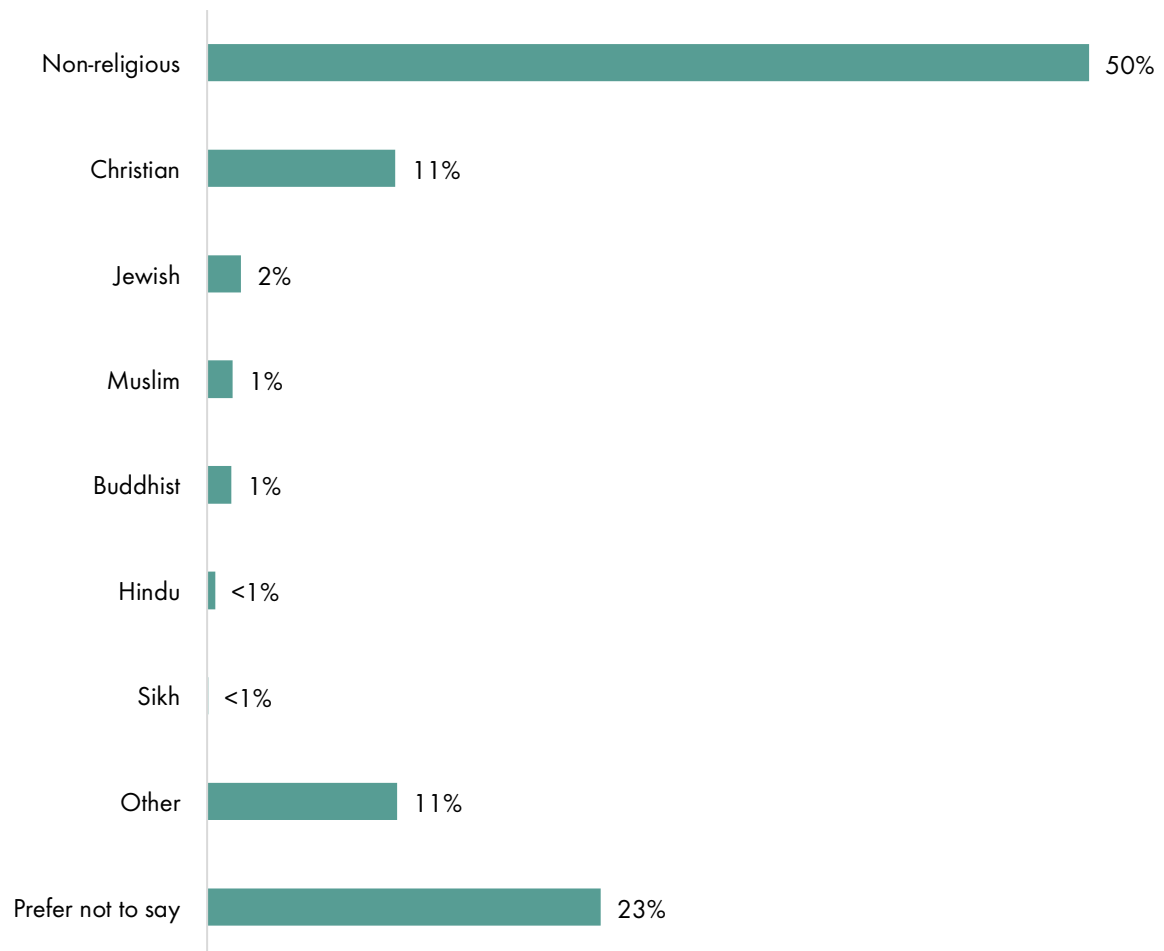
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<sup>6</sup> Respondents were also offered the opportunity to self-describe, which 140 of them chose to do (11 per cent). These responses were coded according to the categories in this figure and are included within the breakdown provided. A substantial proportion of those who chose to self-describe identified as queer, possibly in part because several of the options provided required respondents to choose a gendered sexual orientation (i.e. bi man, bi woman, gay man, gay woman/lesbian).



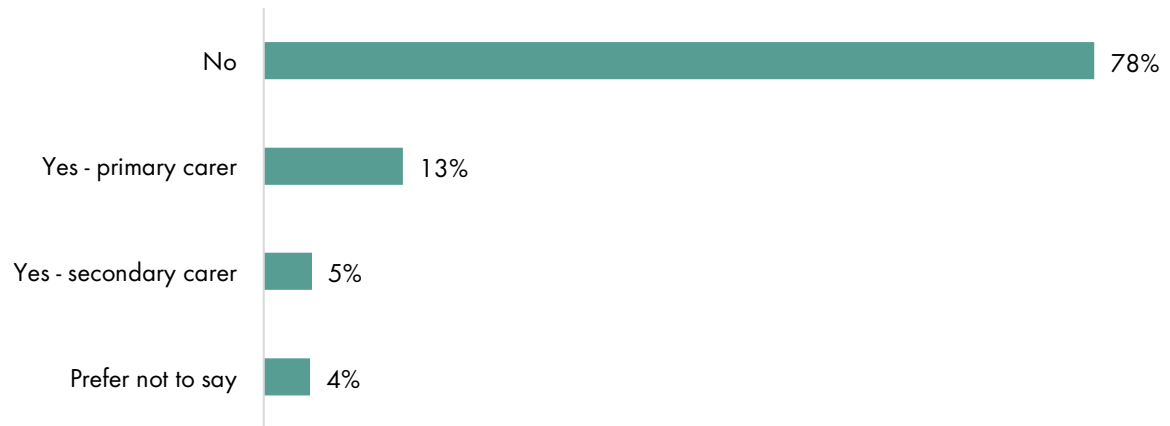
## Religion or belief

Figure A9: What is your religion or belief? (n=1234)



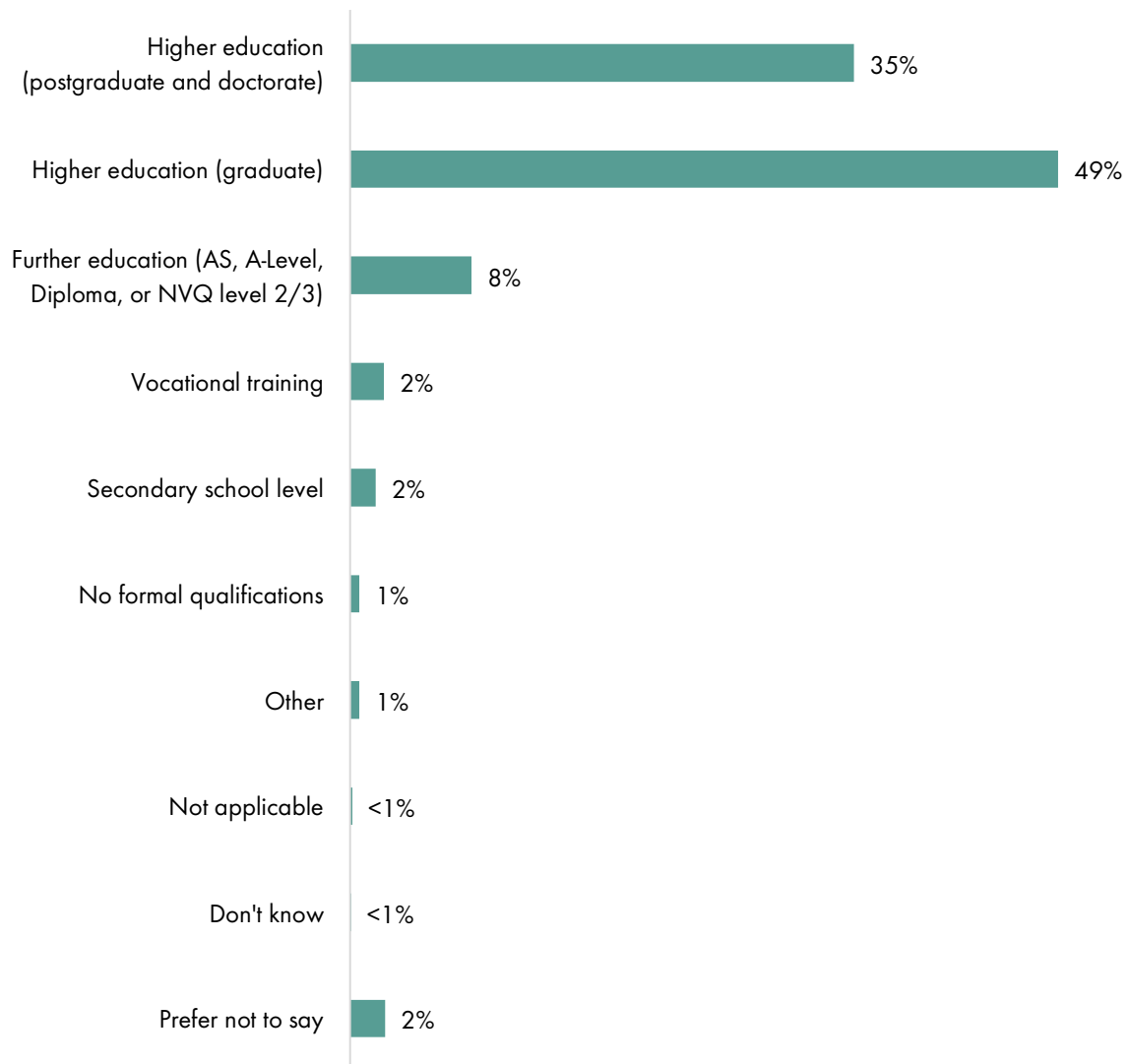
## Caring responsibilities

Figure A10: Do you have caring responsibilities? (n=1240)



## Qualifications

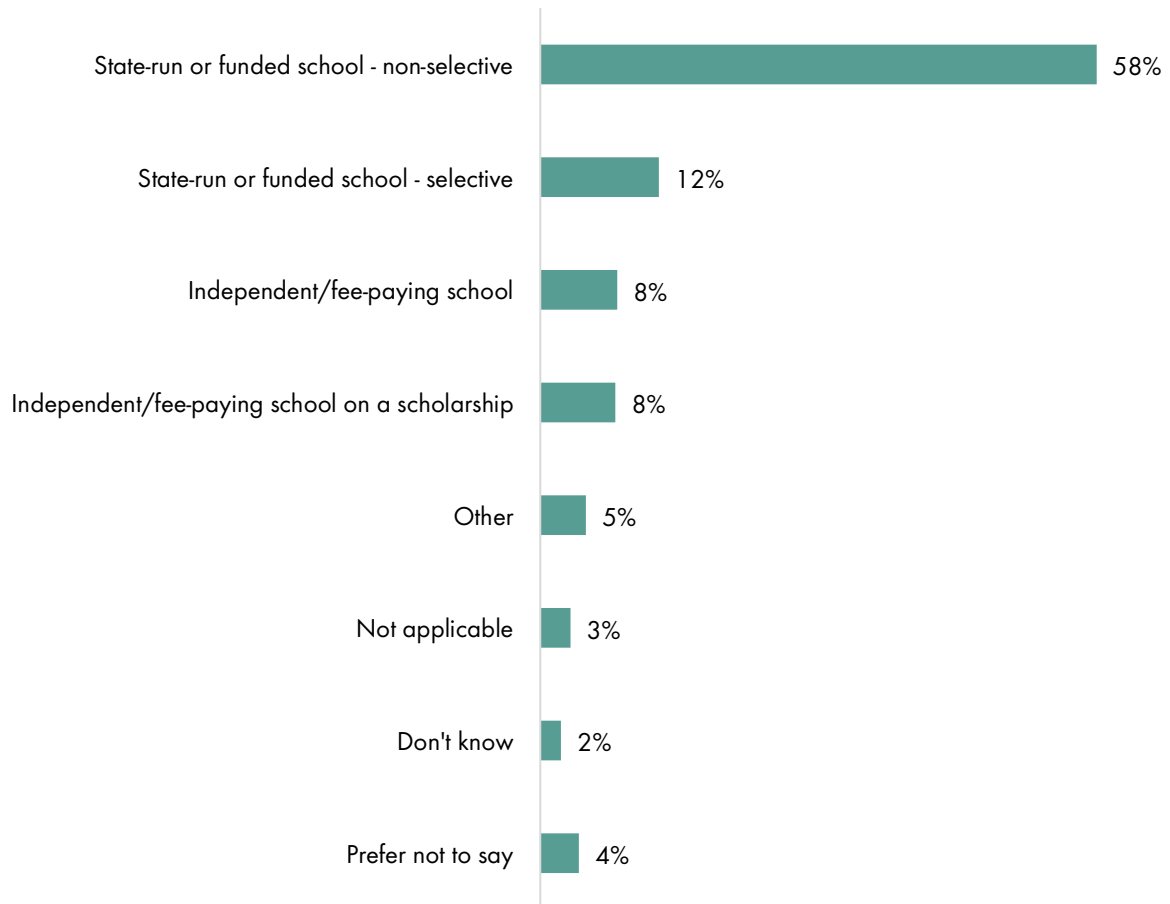
Figure A1 1: What is your highest qualification?<sup>7</sup> (n=1241)



<sup>7</sup> Respondents were also offered the opportunity to specify their highest qualification, which 18 of them chose to do (1 per cent). These responses were coded according to the categories in this figure and are included within the breakdown provided.

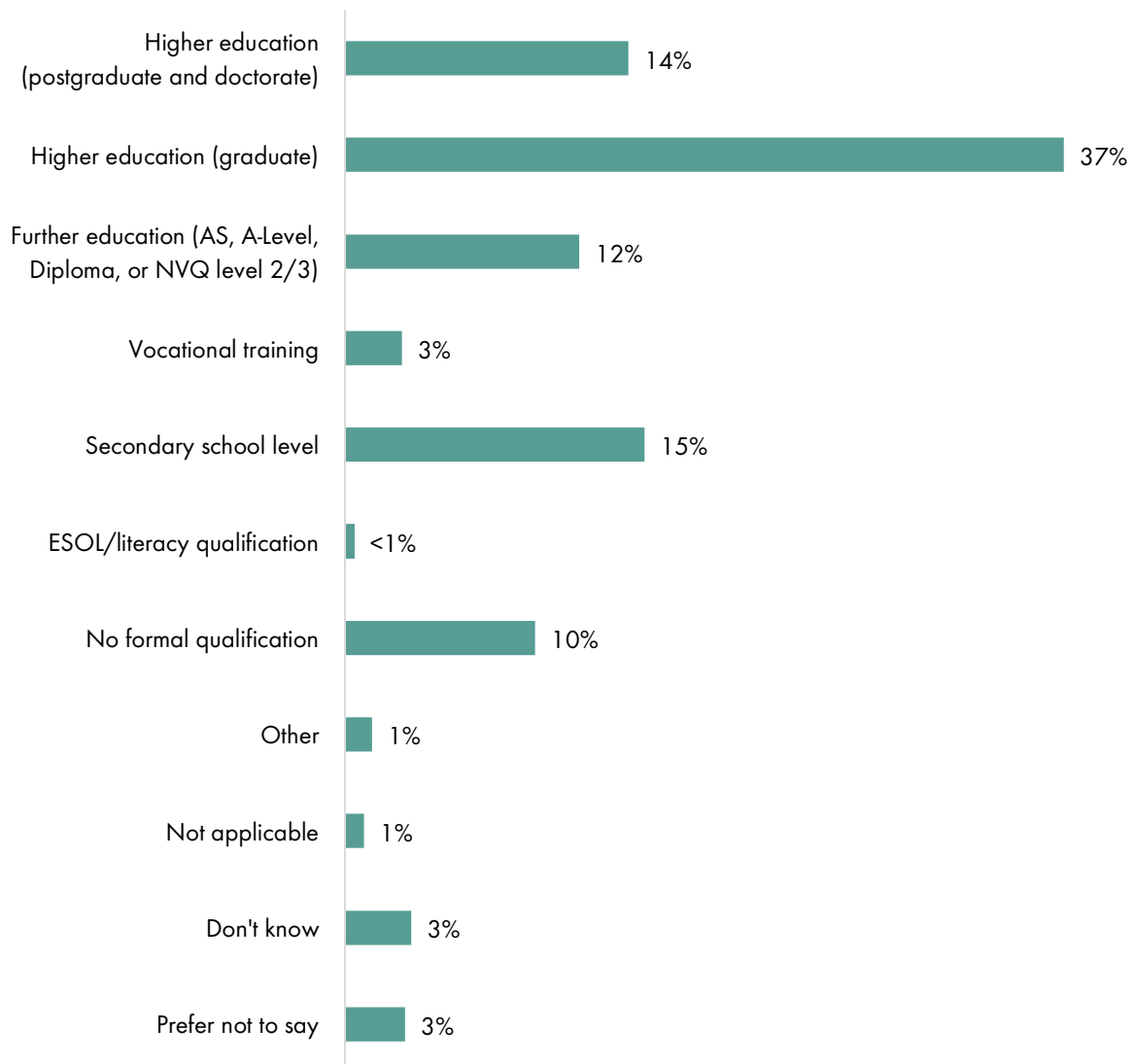
## Socioeconomic background

Figure A12: What type of school did you go to?<sup>8</sup> (n=1241)



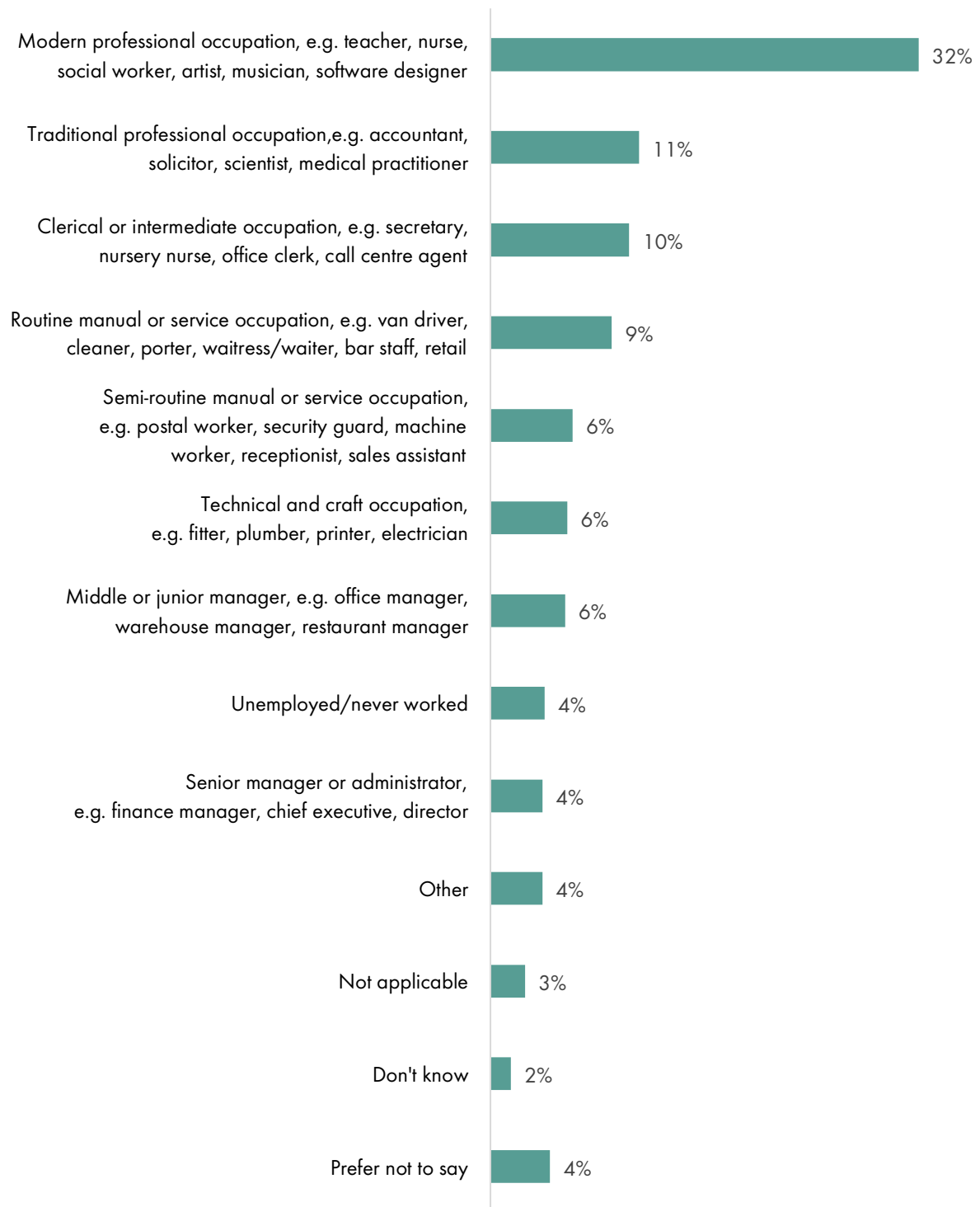
<sup>8</sup> Respondents were also offered the opportunity to specify what type of school they attended, which 64 of them chose to do (5 per cent). These responses were coded according to the categories in this figure and are included within the breakdown provided.

**Figure A13: What was the highest level of qualification of your parent(s)/caregiver(s)?<sup>9</sup>**  
**(n=1241)**



<sup>9</sup> Respondents were also offered the opportunity to specify the highest level of qualification of their parent(s)/carer(s), which 23 of them chose to do (2 per cent). These responses were coded according to the categories in this figure and are included within the breakdown provided.

**Figure A14: Think about your parent(s) or other primary caregiver when you were 14 years old. What did this parent/caregiver do?<sup>10</sup> (n=1240)**



<sup>10</sup> Respondents were also offered the opportunity to specify the occupation of their parent(s) or other primary caregiver when they were 14 years old. which 115 of them chose to do (9 per cent). These responses were coded according to the categories in this figure and are included within the breakdown provided.