State of the Nations research series

WHO STAYS AND WHO LEAVES?

MAPPING ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE CAREERS

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Contents

Foreword

It is a commonly held assumption that the precarity of arts and culture work leads, when times are hard, to disproportionately high exits from arts and culture occupations. A case in point is the Covid-19 pandemic, when there were especially great concerns about drainage of talent from the arts and culture workforce, particularly from the freelance community, which found itself more economically exposed.

Consistent with this understanding, a wide body of international research shows that long-term rates of departure from arts, culture and heritage occupations are indeed relatively high compared with other occupations, and this is especially so for women and younger people.

But what does the latest data say about the magnitude of this phenomenon in the UK workforce? Where do those exiting arts, culture and heritage occupations go: to other roles, economic inactivity or into unemployment? Are the experiences of the self-employed any different? And how do the patterns vary across sociodemographic groups?

In this report, we answer these and other questions systematically for the first time for the UK using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources. Please reach out to the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) and let us know what you think about our answers!

Professor Hasan Bakhshi,
Director, Creative PEC

Executive summary

The sustainability of careers in arts, culture and heritage (ACH) is an ongoing issue in both policy and research, with the *Creative Industries Sector Plan* foregrounding the need to *"build a resilient, skilled and diverse workforce"*.

This report addresses career sustainability by examining departures from ACH occupations. It asks three questions:

- What are the **destinations** of people leaving ACH occupations?
- What are the **characteristics** of people leaving ACH occupations?
- What are the **experiences** of people leaving ACH occupations?

We adopt a mixed-methods approach to answer these questions. We use data from the Labour Force Survey over the period 2015–2024 (inclusive) to address the first two questions by comparing two approaches to measuring departures to triangulate our findings. We then use data from a longitudinal qualitative study, involving people who were working in creative occupations in 2016 being subsequently interviewed in 2024–2025. Our analysis here focuses on people who were working in ACH occupations in 2016 but not in 2024 or 2025.

This report builds on international research indicating that rates of departure from ACH occupations and related fields are relatively high when observed over extended periods. That research also shows that these departures are unevenly distributed, with women and younger people particularly likely to leave.

Our findings are as follows.

In relation to **destinations**:

- The majority of people leaving ACH occupations move into other occupations, most of which are managerial and professional. This suggests that the majority of ACH leavers move to occupations with similar professional status and do not experience downward occupational mobility.
- When measured by comparing people's activities with those of three months earlier, the vast majority of departures from ACH occupations are to other occupations. However, when we use data reported twelve months earlier, a higher proportion of people are found to have left ACH occupations for economic inactivity and unemployment.

In relation to **characteristics**:

- People aged 35 and younger are much more likely than people in other age groups to leave ACH occupations.
- The evidence in relation to disability is mixed. In the short term, we do not see differences, but small ones appear over the longer term, with disabled ACH workers being less likely to leave the workforce than disabled people working in other fields.
- Self-employed people are much less likely than employees to leave ACH occupations.
- We do not see statistically significant differences between men and women, nor between White people and ethnic minorities.
- These findings all hold across the two methods we use to triangulate our results.

In our next stage of analysis, we apply a modelling framework that considers multiple characteristics simultaneously. We then compare these models with equivalent ones for all people in managerial and professional occupations, and across the workforce as a whole, examining the extent to which people change occupations, regardless of type. This enables us to identify whether the patterns we observe in ACH occupations are distinctive to those sectors or reflect broader trends across the workforce.

We find that:

- The majority of the differences observed in the previous stage, such as those between age groups, reflect patterns found in the wider workforce. These differences are largely consistent across our two analytical methods, with some exceptions.
- Women are slightly more likely than men to leave ACH occupations for other occupations. This pattern appears distinctive to ACH occupations.
- Disabled people are more likely than non-disabled people to leave ACH occupations for economic inactivity, but this difference is smaller than that observed across the wider workforce.
- Over the longer term, self-employed people are particularly unlikely to move to other occupations. This pattern also appears to be distinctive to ACH occupations.

The longitudinal qualitative research explores individuals' experiences of leaving, and having left, ACH occupations. The qualitative findings are not aimed at mapping out the extent of departures or their distributions; rather, they provide interpretative insight into the patterns identified in the quantitative analysis.

This research reinforces the important point that developing and sustaining a career in ACH is challenging for everyone, not just for specific groups. However, it also identifies circumstances in which the conditions are particularly challenging for people with caregiving responsibilities, with women being disproportionately affected. For example, women with children reported that the working hours and schedules were often incompatible with family life.

A dominant theme concerned working conditions in ACH more broadly, including low pay, limited opportunities for progression and the challenges associated with precarious employment. The respondents also recognised that the worsening of these conditions is linked to increasing financial pressures across the ACH sectors.

A more positive finding was that people who had moved to other occupations felt that the skills they had developed in ACH were meaningfully transferable and therefore not lost. However, this comes at the cost of these skills not being retained within the ACH sectors.

Overall, this research shows the importance of targeted interventions in the ACH sectors. Addressing low pay, limited opportunities for progression and the incompatibility of working patterns with caregiving responsibilities requires coordinated action at sectoral levels. The distinctive pattern of self-employed people being particularly unlikely to move into other occupations also warrants further investigation.

1 Background

Career sustainability remains a central concern for both policy and research in the cultural sector. The UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport's (DCMS) recent *Industrial Strategy Sector Plan* (DCMS, 2025) foregrounds the need to *"build a resilient, skilled and diverse workforce"* (DCMS, 2025, p. 9). Many of the current policy interventions reflect the importance of widening access to early career and entry-level opportunities. At the same time, questions around how existing workers can develop new skills and how challenges such as low pay can be addressed point to the ongoing issue of career longevity that frames cultural policy discourse.

Academic research has long demonstrated the nature of inequalities in the arts, culture and heritage (ACH) sector (see Brook et al, 2025b, for an overview). In doing so, the research base shows how careers may stall as a result of precarity and pay issues (Comunian et al, 2021), structural labour market failures associated with the mid-career stage for cultural workers (Carey et al, 2021), and experiences of discrimination (Oakley & O'Brien, 2016), bullying and harassment (van Raalte et al, 2023).

Underpinning both the policy and research discussions is the concern that individuals may be leaving the cultural sector due to challenges associated with career sustainability. This represents not only a potential general loss of talent and skills but also a possibility that departures are unevenly distributed across career stages and demographic groups. Research has shown that mid-career women with children face acute difficulties in maintaining, let alone progressing within, ACH careers. These concerns have been further exacerbated by the pandemic, contributing to perceptions of a *"lost generation"* of cultural workers (Gilmore et al, 2024).

To date, those leaving the sector have received less research attention than the broader analysis of sector conditions that may drive their exit. This latest State of the Nations report addresses that gap by offering crucial insights into career exits to inform policymaking and making a unique contribution to the academic study of cultural work. It does so by examining three main areas: the destinations of people leaving ACH occupations, their characteristics, and their experiences and motivations.

1.1 Evidence of the extent of departures from ACH occupations

Various international studies have examined departure rates from ACH occupations. Using data from England and Wales, Brook et al (2025b) compare the proportions of individuals leaving core creative occupations – roughly equivalent to our definition of ACH occupations (McAndrew et al, 2024) – between the census years. They find that among younger cohorts, particularly women in their twenties, retention is relatively low: on average, only around 25% remain in the same occupation ten years later. Even among older cohorts, fewer than half of those working in core creative occupations were found to still be in the same role a decade later.

Brook et al (2025b) also report significant differences in the destinations of people leaving core creative occupations. Very few men – 5% or fewer – working in these occupations were no longer in the workforce ten years later, but the figures for women were substantially higher. Among the oldest cohort, more than 20% of women who had worked in these occupations in their twenties were not working at all a decade later.

Been (2025) finds a smaller, but still large, proportion over a similar period in the Netherlands, with 12% of creative workers having retired, and a further 47% leaving for other reasons. Comparable data from Australia indicates that 36% of men and 30% of women in cultural employment during the 2006 census were still working in the sector in 2016 (Brook et al, 2021).

Overall, these findings show that substantial minorities of the ACH workforce leave their occupations over longer time horizons. However, these studies do not provide comparable figures for other sectors, leaving unresolved the question of whether departure rates in ACH occupations are unusually high.

1.2 Evidence of the characteristics of people leaving ACH occupations

Research on departures from ACH occupations has placed particular emphasis on gender. This focus partly reflects the institutional cultures of the industries studied. For example, long-standing research on gender inequality in screen industries documents widespread evidence of discrimination and poor practice.

As noted above, evidence from both Australia (Brook et al, 2021) and the UK (Brook et al, 2025b) indicates that women are more likely than men to leave ACH occupations. In the UK, women are more likely to leave the workforce entirely, whereas in Australia they are more likely to leave for other occupations. Similar patterns are evident in the United States, where Woronkowicz (2015) finds that women were more likely to leave artistic occupations in the period following the Great Recession, and Frenette and Dowd (2020) report the same trend for the 2010s.

In addition to gender, research consistently identifies differences between age groups in terms of the likelihood of leaving ACH occupations. UK evidence (Brook et al, 2025b) shows that younger people, especially women, are much more likely to leave. Similar patterns are observed in the Netherlands (Been, 2025), Australia (Brook et al, 2021) and the United States (Woronkowicz, 2015). There is also some evidence that ethnic minorities are more likely to leave artistic occupations, although this finding is less consistent across studies, with Woronkowicz reporting that this holds for some periods but not others.

1.3 Evidence of the experience of leaving ACH occupations

In addition to quantitative research on the extent and characteristics of departures from ACH occupations, studies have also explored the reasons why people leave. Percival (2020) combines interviews and questionnaires in a study of individuals leaving the UK television industry, finding that while people were generally positive about their experiences of working in television, they were even more positive about having left. The most common reason given for leaving was that the work was incompatible with parenting. This factor was overwhelmingly concentrated among women, with only one man in the sample giving this reason. Far fewer respondents reported leaving for other reasons such as better work–life balance, health concerns or the precarious nature of employment.

O'Brien (2014) examines women leaving television roles in the Republic of Ireland. In addition to the challenges of balancing work and parenting, the study reports women experiencing both overt and subtle gender discrimination, including in terms of the tasks they were assigned. That author argues that ideologies framing women as actively choosing to leave media roles obscure underlying gender power dynamics.

Financial considerations also emerge as a key motivation for leaving ACH occupations. Beyond academic research, recent industry publications (such as Benson, 2023; Lloyd-Smith, 2024) highlight low pay, particularly in the arts, as a significant reason for people leaving. It is the persistent low pay which is especially problematic, as people experience stagnating, or even declining, incomes while peers in other sectors see their earnings grow.

1.4 The current study

This provides the context for our research. We anticipate relatively high rates of departure from ACH occupations, with women and younger people particularly likely to leave. For women, these departures are expected to be associated with negative experiences in the workplace.

Our study also advances existing research in several ways, as outlined in the following section. A key approach is to contextualise numerical findings against other occupations by, for example, assessing whether gender differences in leaving ACH occupations are unusually pronounced or reflect broader labour market trends. Another important aspect is the use of longitudinal qualitative data, including on people working across a range of ACH roles.

2 Research design

We adopt a mixed-methods design in our longitudinal analysis of career continuity in the ACH sectors.

The quantitative analysis addresses questions about who is leaving ACH occupations and their subsequent destinations. We also situate these findings within the context of other occupations and demographic groups, providing a benchmark for determining whether ACH occupations are outliers or broadly representative of the wider labour market.

The qualitative analysis explores people's motivations for leaving ACH occupations and their experiences, both within these roles and in their subsequent activities outside the sector.

The following Sub-section provides a more detailed description of the data and methods used in the qualitative and quantitative analyses.

2.1 Data and methods: quantitative analysis

Our quantitative analysis draws on the UK Labour Force Survey, which has been conducted quarterly since 1992 and features large sample sizes each quarter. As a sample survey of the UK population, only a small proportion of respondents work in ACH occupations, with an even smaller proportion having recently left these roles. For this reason, we combine Labour Force Survey datasets from 2015 to 2024 inclusive, treating them as a pooled sample. The proportion of people leaving ACH occupations varies somewhat between quarters, generally reflecting labour market shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic (see Gilmore et al, 2025, for further details).

In addition to pooling multiple years of Labour Force Survey data to address sample size limitations, we employ two complementary analytical approaches to maximise confidence in our findings.

First, we use longitudinal data. Participants in the Labour Force Survey are invited to be interviewed in five successive quarters, with the final interview occurring around a year after the first. We identify individuals who have left ACH occupations by comparing their responses about their main job in the first quarter with those in the subsequent quarter. Respondents reporting an ACH occupation as their main job in both quarters are classified as remaining in these roles, while those reporting an ACH occupation in the first but not the second quarter are classified as having left. Using the two-quarter data balances an appropriate time horizon with sufficient sample size, as the proportion of participants responding to two successive quarters is considerably higher than for all five quarters.

Second, we use retrospective data. In the second quarter of each year, with interviews taking place between April and June, participants are asked about their activity one year earlier, including the occupation in which they worked. Respondents whose roles one year earlier and at the time of the interview are classified as ACH occupations are considered to have remained in these roles, while those whose occupations have changed are classified as having left.

In both approaches, we pool samples from all relevant waves to maximise sample size. ACH occupations are defined using Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes, following the same approach as in McAndrew et al (2024).

These occupations are:

- Managers and directors in the creative industries
- Photographers, audiovisual and broadcasting equipment operators
- Newspaper and periodical editors
- Newspaper and periodical journalists and reporters
- Librarians
- Archivists and curators
- Artists
- Actors, entertainers and presenters
- Dancers and choreographers
- Musicians
- Arts officers, producers and directors

This combination of approaches – longitudinal data, where attrition is higher but respondents do not need to recall past activity, and retrospective data, which is unaffected by attrition but relies on recall – allows us to benchmark findings against each other and facilitates triangulation. It should be noted, however, that the patterns are not expected to be identical due to the different time horizons.

Our analysis is limited to individuals who were employed in any occupation at the first relevant time point, so it does not include the entire survey sample. This yields overall sample sizes of 657,060 for the longitudinal data and 288,666 for the retrospective data, of whom 11,920 and 4,820 were initially employed in ACH occupations, respectively, and of whom 1,193 and 353 had left these roles by the second time point.

ACH occupations are identified using reported SOC codes, consistent with McAndrew et al (2024), and correspond to the four main groups: music, performing and visual arts; publishing; museums, galleries and libraries; and film, television, video, radio and photography.

It is important to note that our focus on people's main jobs may either overestimate or underestimate the rates of departure from ACH occupations. A recent study (Brook et al, 2025a) shows that people working in *"core creative"* occupations – a category that almost entirely overlaps with our definition of ACH occupations – are around twice as likely as people working in other occupations to hold second jobs. However, the study also shows that only a very small proportion of people move from holding a creative role as their main occupation (of two or more) to continuing in a creative role that is not their main job. We therefore anticipate that any measurement error arising from people holding multiple jobs is likely to be minimal.

It is also important to acknowledge quality issues with the Labour Force Survey. As noted, we have pooled data across ten years of collection, but some waves occurred during periods of particularly low response rates, notably in 2023, when publications were suspended and National Statistics status was removed (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Data collected in 2025 shows a recovery to pre-pandemic response rates for initial waves, but not for follow-up waves, which is relevant for our longitudinal analysis. While we believe that combining multiple analytical approaches and a long time period provides the most robust basis for this study, these limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting our findings.

In the first part of our analysis, we describe patterns in ACH occupations. We begin by examining the destinations of people leaving these occupations, including the relative proportions of people moving to other occupations, unemployment or other forms of economic inactivity, such as becoming a full-time carer. For those leaving for other occupations, we then break down the destinations by occupational level, including managerial and professional roles, intermediate occupations, and semi-routine and routine occupations. Finally for this section, we consider motivations for leaving, distinguishing between voluntary or personal reasons, such as choosing to care for family or taking another job, and involuntary reasons, such as redundancy or the end of a fixed-term contract.

Having described the destinations of people leaving ACH occupations, we next examine their characteristics. We compare the proportions of leavers by age, gender, ethnic group, disability and employment status (employed versus self-employed). These groups are compared with people who stayed in ACH occupations to identify whether certain characteristics are associated with a higher or lower likelihood of leaving.

In the next stage of our analysis, we compare patterns in ACH occupations with those observed in other occupations. The quantitative analysis concludes with multinomial logistic regressions – a statistical technique used to examine which factors are associated with different outcomes. In these regressions, the outcomes of interest are people leaving ACH occupations for other occupations or leaving the workforce entirely, with those remaining in these occupations as the reference category. This modelling framework enables us to identify characteristics that are significantly associated with particular types of departure.

Crucially, these models are contrasted with equivalent models for people in occupations that the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification defines as managerial, administrative and professional (NS-SEC II occupations), and for all occupations more broadly. This comparison allows us to determine whether characteristics associated with specific outcomes are unique to ACH occupations or reflective of broader labour market patterns.
In the comparison models, we assess whether individuals remain in the same or a similar role, whether ACH or not, by comparing three-digit SOC codes. For example, someone working as a biological scientist at one time point and as a biomedical scientist at the next is not classified as having left their job. This step enables us to assess the distinctiveness, or otherwise, of ACH occupations within the wider labour market.

2.2 Data and methods: qualitative analysis

The quantitative data analysis is designed to examine the destinations of people who leave ACH occupations, their characteristics and how they compare with individuals leaving other occupations. To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and motivations of those leaving ACH occupations, we draw on findings from a qualitative study exploring individuals' narratives and perspectives on these career transitions.

This sample is therefore based on individuals working in ACH and creative occupations nine years earlier. Of these 120 follow-up interviewees, 25 had left the ACH sectors entirely by 2025. Our focus here is on these 25 interviews to examine the specific experiences of those leaving the sector. Due to the sampling method, we do not claim that these individuals are representative of the broader ACH workforce. It is also likely that leavers were underrepresented in the final sample of 120, potentially reflecting the original study's association with work in the cultural sector.

Despite these limitations in terms of sampling and representativeness, the 25 interviewees offer a unique insight into leaving the sector. This is for three reasons. First, long-term longitudinal work on creative careers is rare, and longitudinal qualitative studies on the UK cultural sector are almost entirely absent, making this report one of the first of its kind. Second, the analysis aligns closely with established research on cultural careers, particularly regarding pay, progression and precarity, providing strong qualitative evidence to reinforce ongoing academic and policy concerns. Finally, we do not use the sample to support claims about demographic trends in reporting on the sector; the sample is skewed towards women, and gendered inequalities emerge as a prominent theme.

Interviews were transcribed using MacWhisper and subsequently checked by human coders. Two coders then applied inductive thematic analysis to the transcripts. This report presents the main themes emerging from that analysis.

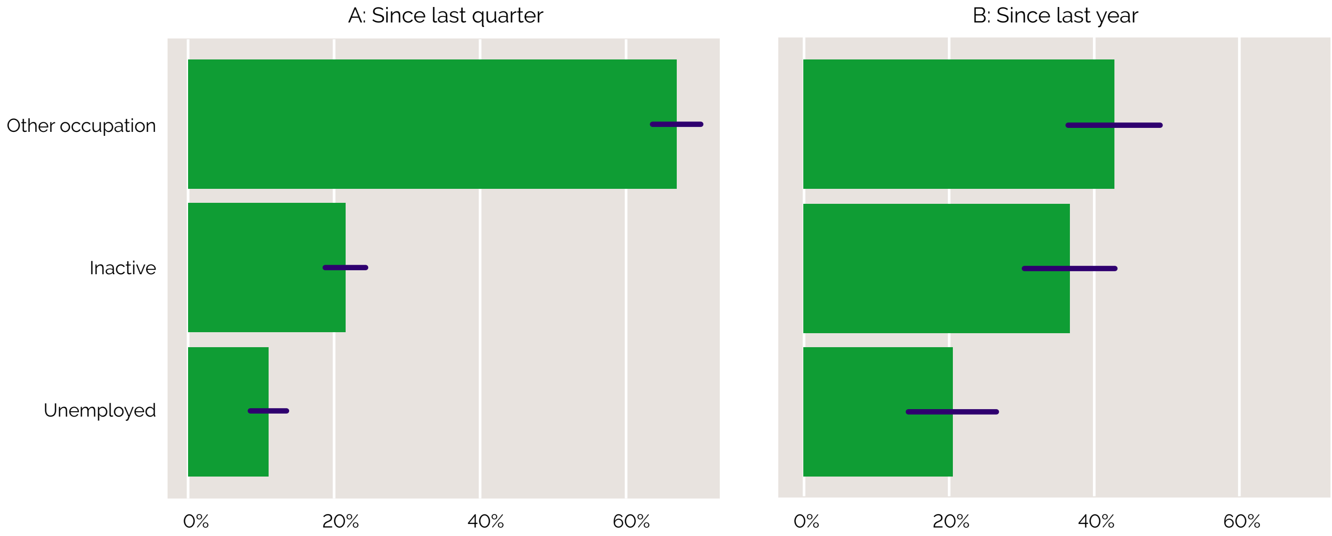
3 Evidence from the Labour Force Survey

3.1 Departures from ACH occupations: destinations

Figure 1 shows the destination distribution of people leaving ACH occupations.

Column A shows the percentages of people who left at any point during the preceding three months, based on longitudinal Labour Force Survey data for two quarters. Column B shows the percentages of people who left over the previous twelve months, based on retrospective Labour Force Survey data. It is important to note that these are percentages refer only to individuals who left ACH occupations within the relevant time periods. As such, the values are not directly comparable, as they represent different proportions of leavers over different time horizons.

Figure 1: Destinations of people leaving ACH occupations



Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

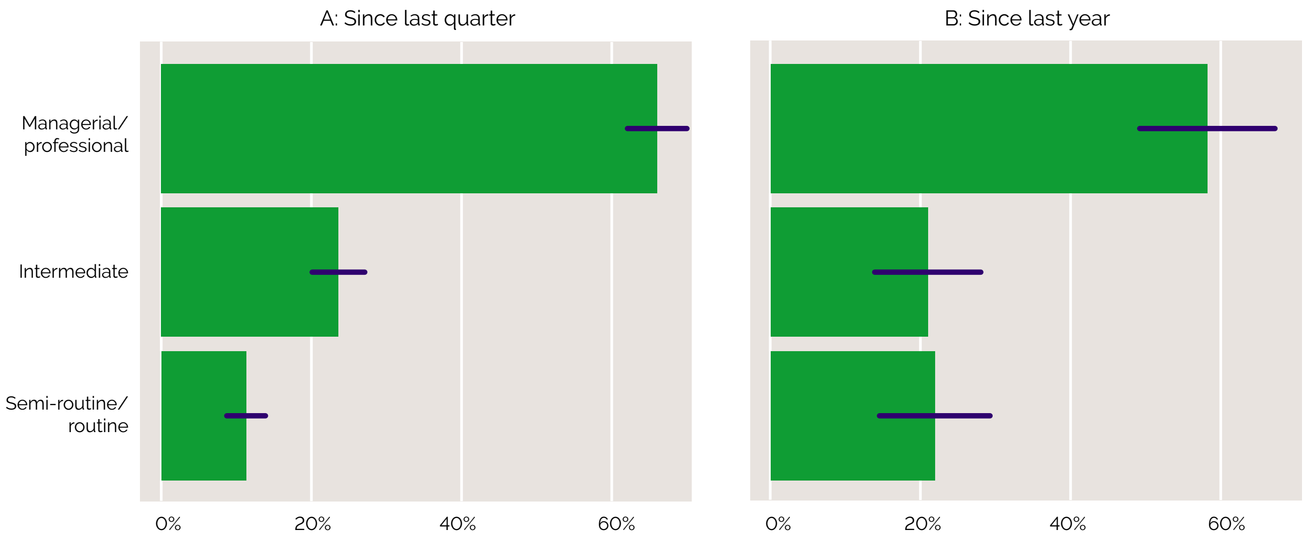
Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

Figure 1 shows that the most common destination for people leaving ACH occupations is other occupations, followed by economic inactivity (such as caregiving for family while not seeking employment) and unemployment (where an individual is actively seeking work but does not currently have a job). Unemployment is relatively uncommon, affecting around 10% of leavers over the past three months and 20% over the past year.

There are some differences between those two time horizons. Among those who left in the last three months, around two thirds moved to other occupations, whereas the equivalent figure over the past year is around 45%. These differences are not a cause for concern; it is more common over longer periods for individuals to move from one occupation to another and subsequently leave the workforce. Since the shorter-term data covers all quarters from 2015 to 2024, these differences do not reflect seasonal patterns such as people being more likely to change jobs at particular times of the year. Overall, these figures show that the primary destination for people leaving ACH occupations is other occupations.

We extend this analysis in Figure 2, which shows the types of occupations that people leaving ACH occupations subsequently entered. Figure 2 distinguishes between managerial and professional occupations, intermediate occupations, and semi-routine and routine occupations. The vast majority of ACH workers are classified within managerial and professional occupations. Owing to sample size limitations, we do not separately identify the small number of ACH workers classified as holding intermediate occupations.

Figure 2: Occupational destinations of people leaving ACH occupations for other occupations



Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

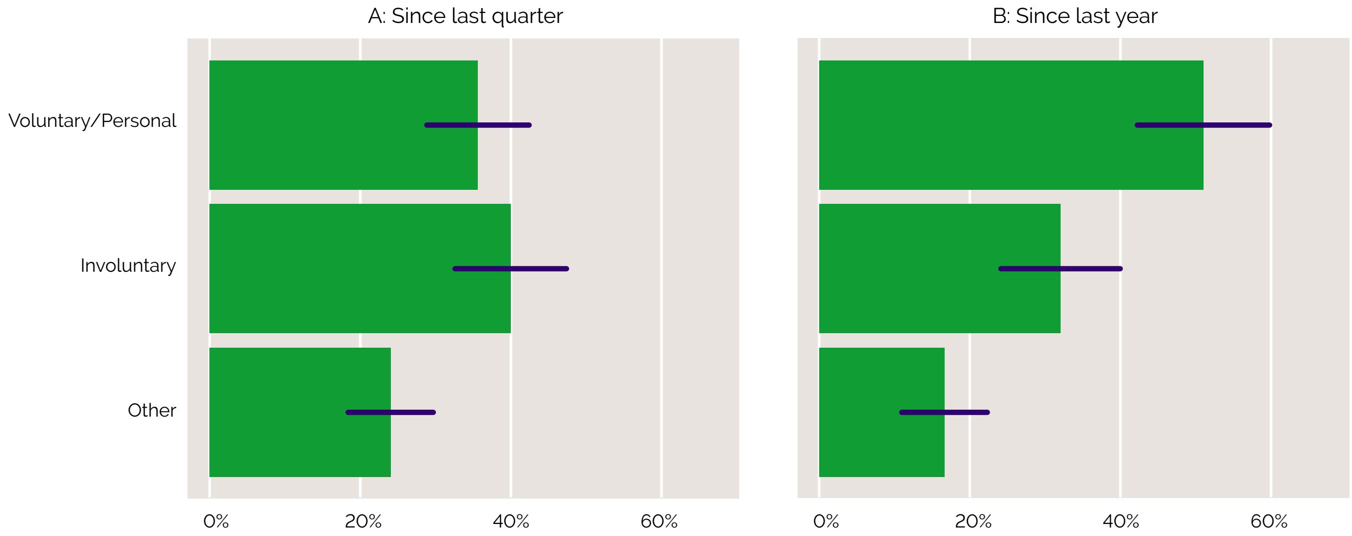
Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

Figure 2 shows that the majority of people leaving an ACH occupation for other roles moved into managerial or professional occupations. This pattern holds for both the three-month and twelve-month datasets. While there are some minor differences in the exact values, particularly over the shorter time horizon, where the proportion entering intermediate occupations is slightly higher and that for semi-routine or routine occupations is slightly lower – these variations fall within the margin of error in both cases.

Overall, around 40% of leavers moved into intermediate, semi-routine or routine occupations. Although not insignificant, this is less than the proportion of the wider workforce employed in these categories. These findings suggest that the majority of people leaving ACH are not experiencing downward occupational mobility but are instead remaining in roles of broadly comparable professional status.

Figure 3 shifts the focus from destinations to motivations, illustrating the reasons people gave for leaving ACH occupations. As described in Sub-section 2.1, this data is drawn from a question asking respondents about why they left their previous job. A smaller proportion of respondents answered this question, particularly in the two-quarter data, resulting in wider margins of error for each category.

Figure 3: Reasons for leaving an ACH occupation



Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

The distribution of reasons for people leaving differs between those who left in the last quarter and those who left over the last year. This is likely a reflection, at least in part, of the different destinations shown in Figure 1. Over a longer time horizon, a smaller proportion left for another occupation, while a larger proportion reported leaving for voluntary or personal reasons such as caregiving for family.

Among those who left in the previous quarter, similar proportions reported leaving for voluntary or personal reasons as for involuntary reasons. Voluntary reasons include taking up another job or choosing to leave work to care for family members, while involuntary reasons include redundancy or reaching the end of a fixed-term contract.

For those who left during the previous year, a greater proportion cited voluntary or personal reasons than involuntary ones. This aligns with the higher proportion of people who had become economically inactive since leaving their ACH occupation. In such cases, people are more likely to be recorded as having left the workforce for voluntary or personal reasons than through unemployment due to involuntary reasons.

Unfortunately, the 'Other' category, representing between 20% and 25% of responses, is not disaggregated, so we cannot provide further details.

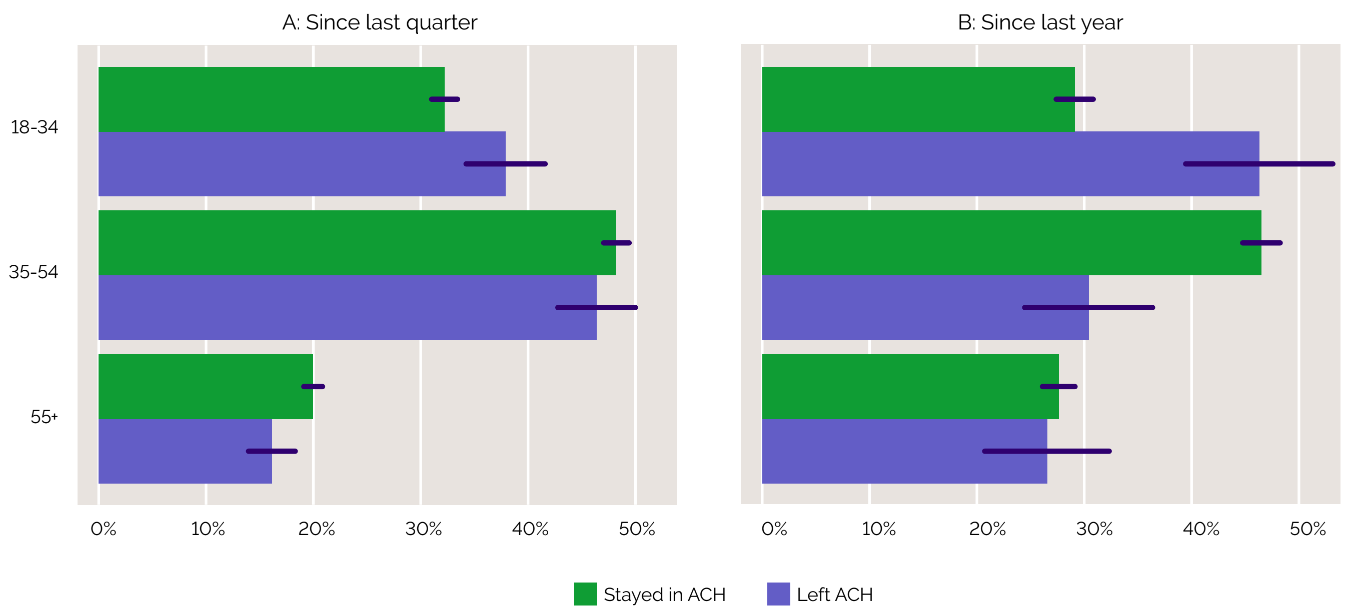
Taken together, Figures 1–3 indicate that people leave ACH occupations both for employment elsewhere and for economic inactivity. They also show that, when comparing activity over a one-year period instead of over three months, a slightly larger percentage of people leave the workforce, often voluntarily. The majority of those moving to another occupation transition into other managerial and professional roles.

The next Sub-section examines the characteristics of people leaving ACH occupations.

3.2 Departures from ACH occupations: destinations – characteristics of leavers

Figure 4 shows the age distributions of people leaving ACH occupations (in purple) in comparison with the people who continued to work in ACH occupations (in green).

Figure 4: Comparison by age of people leaving, and staying in, ACH occupations



Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

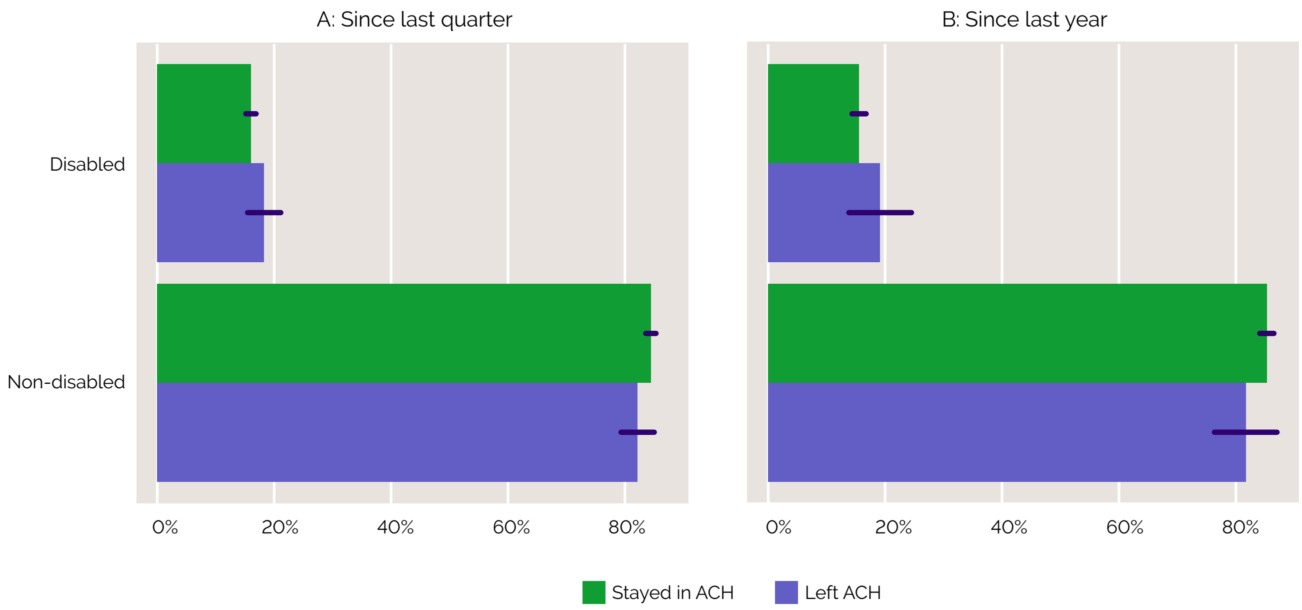
Younger people are much more likely than older people to have left ACH occupations. Around 38% of people who had left these occupations in the preceding three months were under 35, compared with around 30% of people staying in these occupations. That is a statistically significant difference. When compared over twelve months, the difference is even wider, at over 40% against, again, around 30%.

In the two-quarter data, we do not see statistically significant differences for people aged 35–54, but we do see differences in the twelve-month comparison, where people aged 35–54 make up a significantly larger proportion of the people who remain in these occupations than of those who leave. This discrepancy between the datasets is the reverse of the case for people aged 18–34. People aged 55 and older make up a slightly larger proportion of the staying group than the leaving group, but this difference is only statistically significant in the case of the two-quarter data.

This difference aligns with the findings of Gilmore et al (2024), who report that younger people are more likely to leave creative occupations. Our results indicate that this pattern holds over a longer time span, extending beyond the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 5 presents the corresponding data for disabled people, comparing the proportion of disabled individuals who remain in ACH occupations with those who leave.

Figure 5: Comparison by disability of people leaving, and staying in, ACH occupations



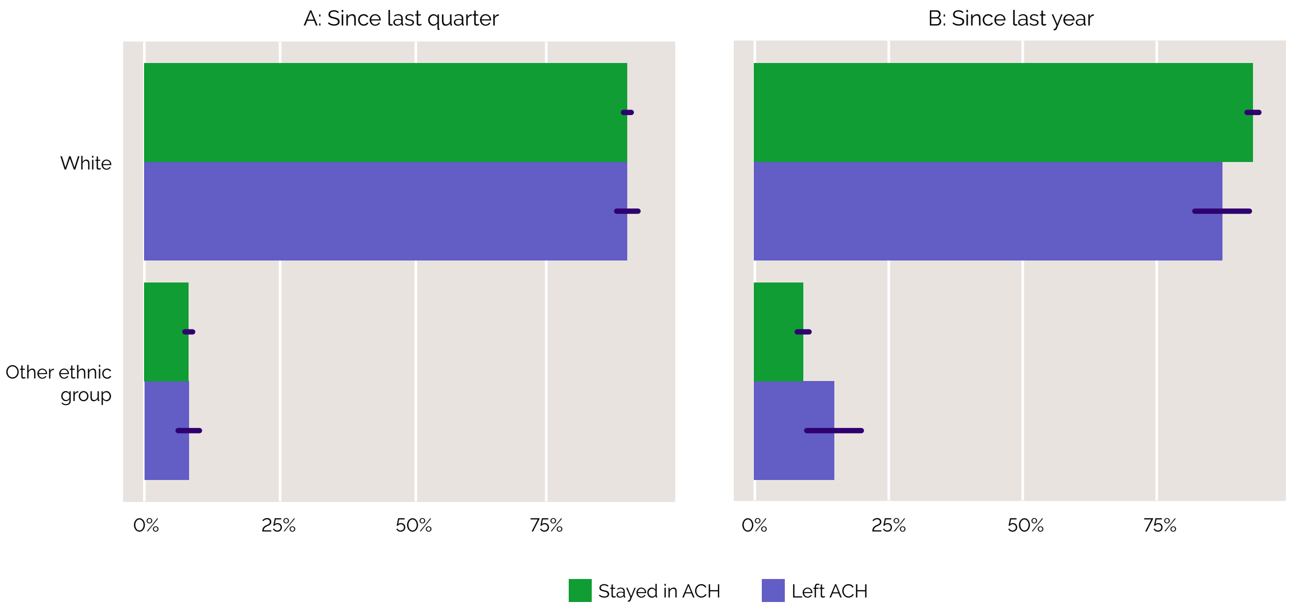
Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

Figure 5 shows no statistically significant differences between people who remained in ACH occupations and those who left, by disability, with very similar results for the two timescales.

Figure 6 compares the people staying in and those leaving ACH occupations, by ethnic group. As the number of ethnic minority people working in ACH occupations is relatively low (Brook et al, 2025b), this figure compares White people with people from other ethnic groups.

Figure 6: Comparison by ethnic group of people leaving, and staying in, ACH occupations



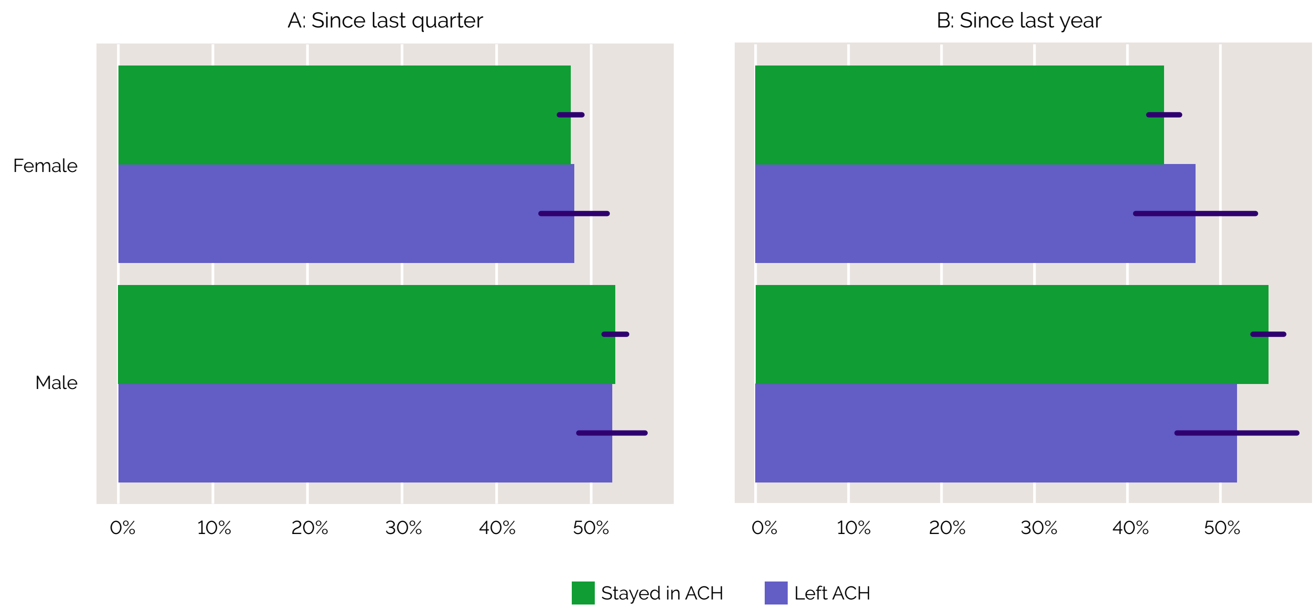
Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

Figure 6 shows slight differences between the shorter- and longer-term comparisons of people leaving ACH occupations. In the two-quarter data, no differences are recorded, with people from other ethnic groups making up around 10% of both leavers and stayers. However, over the year, ethnic minority workers account for a slightly higher proportion of leavers, at around 12%, compared with 10% of stayers. Although small, this difference is (just) statistically significant.

Figure 7 shows the corresponding data for men and women.

Figure 7: Comparison by sex of people leaving, and staying in, ACH occupations



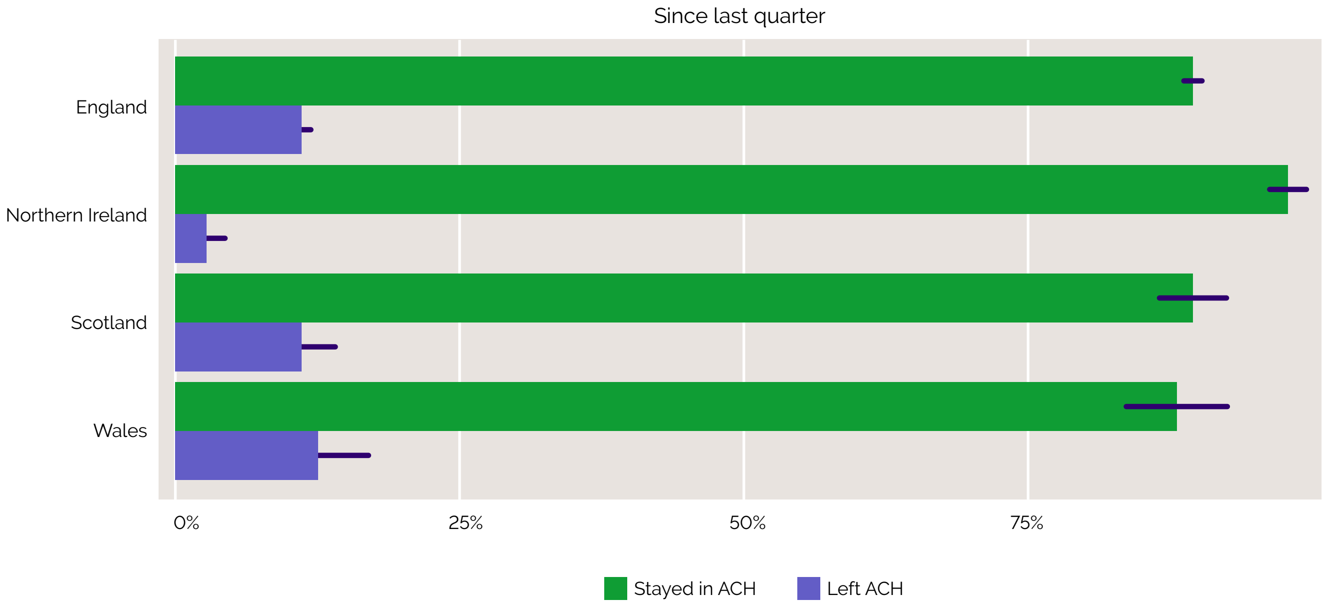
Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

Figure 7 shows no differences between men and women in staying in or leaving ACH occupations. Overall, men represent a slightly larger proportion of workers in these roles, both among those leaving and staying. Panel B, which covers a one-year period, indicates that men may be marginally more likely to stay, but the difference is not statistically significant. This is a striking and somewhat unexpected finding given the emphasis on gender inequalities in the academic literature.

Figure 8 compares leavers and stayers across the four nations of the UK. The data is presented as percentages of people leaving and staying, by nation. Only the two-quarter longitudinal data is presented, as sample sizes for Northern Ireland are too small in the annual dataset.

Figure 8: Comparison across the four nations of the UK of people leaving, and staying in, ACH occupations



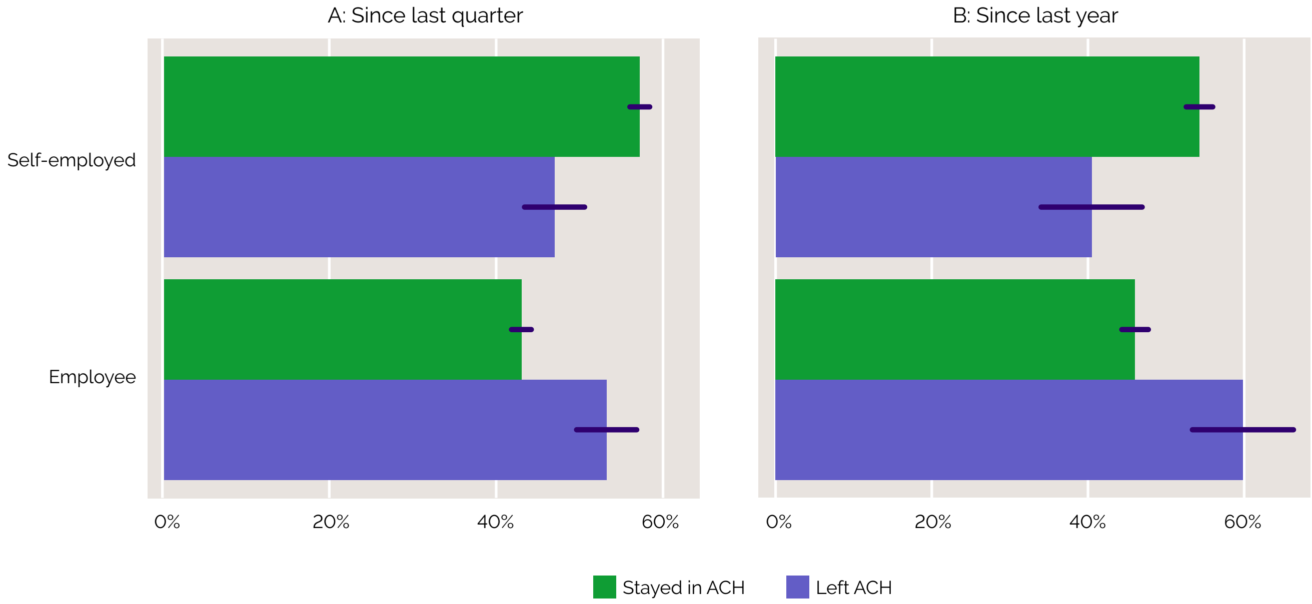
Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample.

Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

Rates of departure from ACH occupations are very similar across England, Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland, the rate is noticeably lower, representing a statistically significant difference, although the sample size there is relatively smaller than for the other home nations.

The final figure in this Sub-section, Figure 9, compares departure rates from ACH occupations by employment status, distinguishing between self-employed workers and employees.

Figure 9: Comparison by employment status of people leaving, and staying in, ACH occupations



Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

Note: Percentages are calculated as survey-weighted proportions for each destination category, with 95% confidence intervals. The proportions are based directly on weighted survey responses within the chosen period.

Figure 9 highlights a clear and important difference between employed and self-employed people. Self-employed workers represent a significantly larger proportion of those staying in ACH occupations than those leaving: 58% versus 48%, respectively, for the preceding quarter, and 55% versus 40%, respectively, for the preceding year. However, sample uncertainty means that we cannot be confident that the gap is genuinely wider over twelve months than over three.

This pattern, where employees are more likely than self-employed people to leave ACH occupations, is an important one and warrants further investigation. Sub-section 3.3 compares these differences, along with those observed throughout Sub-section 3.2, with other occupations to assess whether they are distinctive or reflect broader workforce patterns. Sub-section 3.4 then examines these characteristics together.

3.3 Departures from ACH occupations: regression modelling

Figure 10 presents the results of multinomial logistic regressions comparing three possible outcomes: (1) remaining in the same occupation across two time periods, (2) moving to a different occupation and (3) leaving the occupation for either economic inactivity (such as caregiving for family while not seeking work) or unemployment.

The reference category is remaining in the same occupation, so statistically significant differences indicate characteristics associated with either moving to another occupation or inactivity, relative to those staying in that original occupation. People who retired are excluded from the analysis. Predictor variables include gender, ethnic group, disability status, age group and employment status (employee or self-employed).

Panel A uses two-quarter longitudinal data based on interviews conducted in consecutive quarters. Panel B uses annual longitudinal data from interviews conducted between April and June of each year, with the respondents asked about their activity one year earlier.

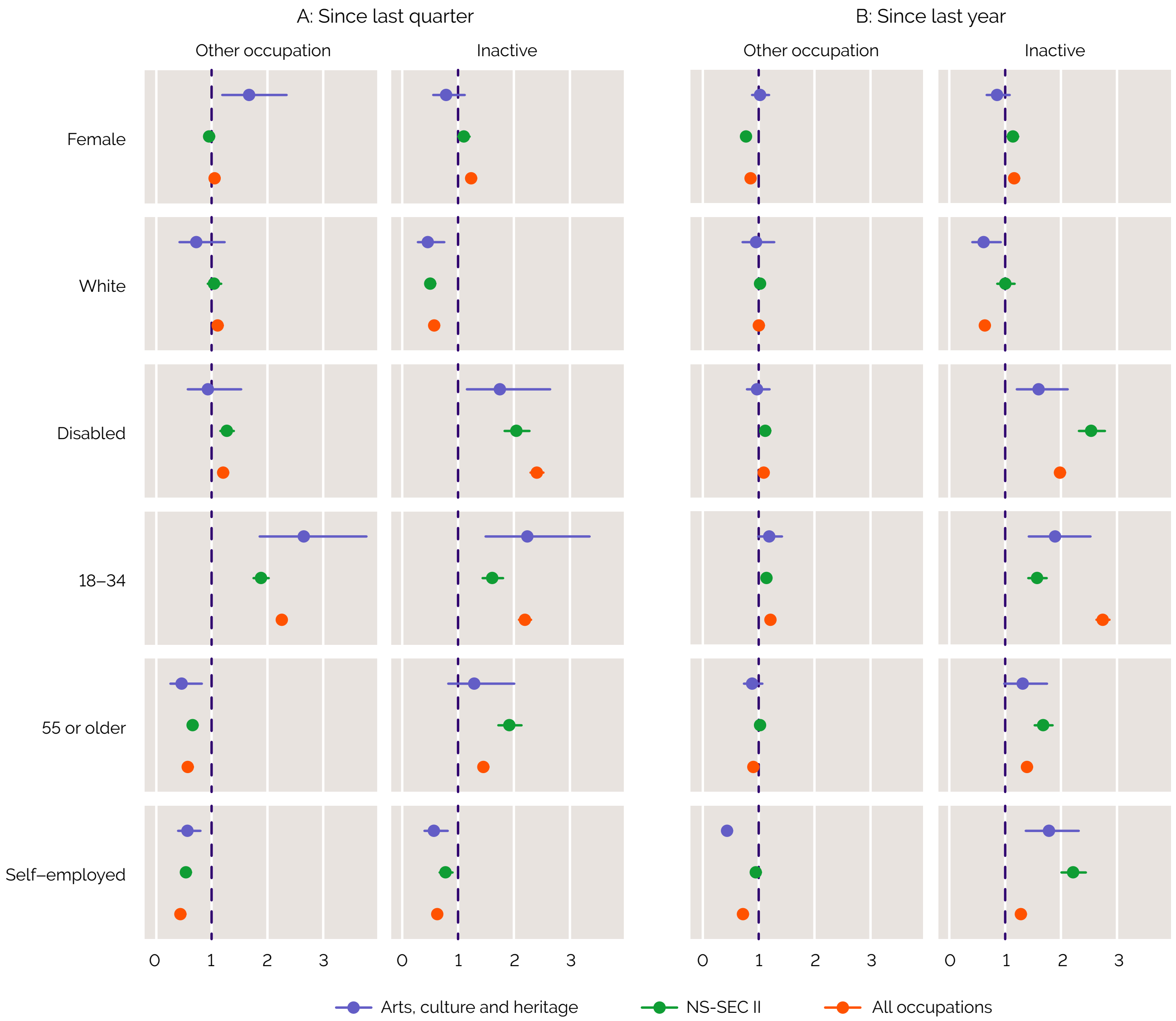
For each dataset, three models were estimated:

- Model 1 (purple): ACH occupations only
- Model 2 (green): all NS-SEC II occupations, which is a broader category than the above and encompasses most ACH roles
- Model 3 (orange): all occupations

This structure allows us to assess whether observed patterns are specific to ACH occupations, typical of similar occupational classes or reflective of the workforce more generally. The dependent variable identifies whether someone remained in the same or closely related occupation, as defined by the same ACH category for Model 1 and by the first three digits of the SOC code for Models 2 and 3.

The sample sizes for the two-quarter data in Panel A are: 11,290 (Model 1), 176,975 (Model 2) and 657,060 (Model 3). For the cross-sectional data in Panel B, the sample sizes are: 4,820 (Model 1), 77,316 (Model 2) and 288,666 (Model 3).

Figure 10: Results of multinomial logistic regressions estimating consistency and change in activity



Authors' elaboration based on Labour Force Survey Two-Quarter Longitudinal Datasets, October 2014–March 2015 to October 2024–March 2025 inclusive, pooled sample (Panel A); Labour Force Survey April–June waves 2015–2024, pooled sample (Panel B).

Note: The x-axis corresponds to odds ratios.

In Sub-section 3.2, we observed some differences between demographic groups. Notably, younger people were substantially more likely to leave ACH occupations than older individuals, and there was tentative evidence of differences between White people and those from other ethnic groups.

As shown in the two-quarter data in Panel A, women are slightly more likely than men to leave ACH for other occupations, but they are not significantly more likely to leave for economic inactivity. This aligns with the existing academic research and likely reflects the higher proportion of women in key ACH roles. Interestingly, this pattern does not hold for NS-SEC II occupations or the workforce more broadly. However, when comparing ACH occupations with all other occupations, women are statistically significantly less likely than men to leave for economic inactivity.

The picture becomes more nuanced in the annual data shown in Panel B. Over this longer time horizon, women are as likely as men to leave ACH occupations for other occupations. In contrast, in other NS-SEC II occupations, women are less likely than men to change jobs. This suggests that, while gender differences in those leaving ACH occupations for other roles are quite small, larger gender gaps exist in other occupations, where women are comparatively less mobile. Similarly, women in ACH roles are less likely than those in other occupations to leave for economic inactivity.

White people are statistically significantly less likely than ethnic minorities to leave ACH occupations for economic inactivity, though there are no differences in leaving for other occupations. This pattern is consistent across ACH and other occupations, and it holds for both shorter- and longer-term data.

Disabled people are more likely than non-disabled people to become economically inactive relative to remaining in ACH occupations, but they are not more likely to move to another occupation. In the shorter-term data, these differences are not statistically significant, mirroring patterns observed across all occupations. Over a longer time horizon, however, the difference in ACH occupations is statistically significantly smaller than in other occupations.

Turning to age, our finding that younger people are statistically significantly more likely to leave ACH occupations persists. In most cases, this reflects broader labour market trends, with similar patterns observed in other NS-SEC II occupations and across all occupations. One point of particular note is that, although the difference is not statistically significant due to a fairly wide margin of error, younger people appear more likely to leave ACH occupations for other roles over a shorter time horizon than their counterparts in other NS-SEC II occupations. This could indicate a more volatile labour market for younger ACH workers, but it may reflect random variation rather than a genuine difference in the underlying population.

Finally, the pattern observed for employment status is confirmed: employed people are significantly more likely to leave ACH occupations than self-employed individuals. Some additional nuances emerge. In the short term, the trend mirrors that in other occupations: self-employed ACH workers are less likely to move to another occupation or become economically inactive. Over the longer term, however, self-employed ACH workers are particularly unlikely to move to other occupations: this difference is larger than for people in other occupations. They are also slightly more likely to move to economic inactivity, although the extent is comparable to other NS-SEC II occupations and greater than for all other occupations.

In summary, these models indicate that the majority of the differences associated with leaving ACH occupations reflect broader labour market patterns. Nonetheless, certain characteristics are distinctive to ACH occupations, particularly in relation to gender, disability and self-employment. Specifically, compared with other occupations:

- Women are more likely to leave ACH occupations for other roles but less likely to do so for economic inactivity.
- Disabled workers are less likely to leave ACH occupations for economic inactivity than their counterparts in similar labour conditions.
- Self-employed people are particularly unlikely to move to other occupations.

4 Evidence from longitudinal qualitative data

The quantitative analysis identified clear patterns of leaving, highlighting inequalities linked to gender and disability, as well as a higher churn for younger workers. It also revealed an important finding on the relative persistence of the self-employed in ACH occupations. While these results offer initial insights into the reasons behind such patterns, deeper understanding, and the basis for more detailed and effective policy recommendations, will require analysis of the longitudinal qualitative data.

Accessing and progressing in the cultural sector is not easy. The literature has established that every demographic group faces issues of pay, progression and employment precarity in that sector (Brook et al, 2025b), exacerbated by the pandemic (Gilmore et al, 2024). Although much is known about these structural issues and the deteriorating circumstances across ACH occupations (Willment and Newsinger, 2025), the question of why workers choose to leave has received far less attention.

Leaving the sector occurs for many reasons. Individuals' lives take many twists and turns, with decisions about employment reflecting a wide range of personal and professional circumstances. The qualitative data captured this multiplicity of experiences while also revealing some distinct groupings. For some of our participants, the decision to leave was shaped by well-known factors, with the sector's pay and working conditions central to their accounts.

In some narratives, experiences of low pay and poor working conditions were connected to limited opportunities for career progression. For those with caregiving responsibilities, particularly women who were starting families or already had children, these issues intersected with the wider challenges posed by the structure of the UK welfare state (Feder et al, 2025).

Pay, conditions and career progression remain persistent challenges across the ACH sectors. The gendered nature of care, and the impact of caregiving responsibilities on career trajectories, are also well known, yet neither set of issues is being adequately addressed at a sector-wide level.

As mentioned, the challenges were further compounded by the effects of the pandemic, and the wider structural problems of sector funding. The pandemic, redundancies, financial instability and ongoing uncertainty around the sector's sustainability featured prominently in several interviewees' accounts of moving into alternative careers.

It was rare for an interviewee in this dataset to identify a single motivation for leaving. Their decisions typically reflected a combination of factors, with varying emphasis placed on each. This interplay of influences is an important point to keep in mind as the following Sub-sections examine the specific drivers for leaving the sector.

To put the following section into context, we should first provide an overview of the qualitative longitudinal sample and consider how the people who left ACH occupations differed from those who remained. As noted earlier, the overall qualitative longitudinal sample had 120 participants, 25 of whom had left ACH occupations between interview waves.

Of those 25 participants, 21 were women (84%), compared with 85 women out of 120 in the overall sample (71%). Of those leavers, 22 were White (88%), compared with 105 in the overall sample. Of the 25 leavers, 18 grew up in households where the primary income earner worked in a managerial or professional occupation (72%), compared with 65 out of 120 (54%) across the sample as a whole. This suggests that women, and individuals who grew up in households with a managerial or professional primary earner, were more likely to have left ACH occupations. The average age of leavers was 43.5 years, compared with 46.6 years for the overall sample. However, this should be understood in the context of the original 2015 recruitment, with newer entrants to ACH occupations not being represented.

These aspects of sample composition provide important context for the following analysis. As our sample is predominantly composed of women, White participants and people who grew up in households with a managerial or professional primary earner, the interview quotations presented below reflect that distribution.

4.1 Pay

Low pay remains a persistent issue across ACH sectors. It was cited as a reason for leaving, regardless of interviewee sector, career stage and demographic background. Four examples illustrate this point.

The first comes from a White woman in her thirties, from a middle-class background, who had been working in theatre in 2016. She described her frustration at very low pay despite her skills and level of seniority:

"The last arts job I had, I was the senior technician, and for a while was acting technical manager, and my pay topped out at £22,000 a year, which isn't very much. By anyone's standards… I could get a higher hourly rate working in a Sainsbury's."

Later in the discussion about pay, she reflected that *"it was just getting harder and harder to balance it all."* At the time of 2025 interview, she was working in the information technology sector. Similar concerns were raised by a White woman of middle-class origin, in her forties, who had moved from participatory arts practice into the health sector. For her, the issue went beyond low pay to the absence of pay altogether, as expectations of unpaid work and volunteering had contributed to her decision to pursue a more financially rewarding career:

"I definitely got to a point where I was a bit like, you know what, I need to be paid for what I'm doing now. I still like I do a volunteer role, not the same capacity, because I care about change, but I noticed that my energy, my generosity in doing it as well had probably dried up a little bit."

The closing point in that comment demonstrates how pay influences a worker's capacity to deliver ACH projects. This point echoes several of the other themes discussed below. A White man in his 30s, of middle-class origin, who moved from the theatre industry to the health sector reflected on how support from his family had enabled him to retrain: *"I was kind of in a position where it was feasible to because of my wife's situation, to kind of do less work for a couple of years while I retrained"*. He also described how his remaining creative connections were now supported by his new occupation: *"I can do that because I have an income… you know the equivalent of a full-time income from what I do."*

A final example links pay to broader inequalities within the ACH sectors. This is evident from the comment by a White woman in her thirties from a middle-class background who moved from the music industry into the corporate and business world. Although she maintained connections with career opportunities in the arts, she noted that low pay was contributing to the sector's exclusivity:

"When I look at salaries now for arts jobs, I just, you know, like to see what's kind of off, what's on offer, I guess feels like they haven't really changed since I left. You're looking at similar kind of salaries… it's just a bit like London's a very expensive city to live in. So yeah, it's just the people who are going to be able to do those kinds of jobs are people who've got like family support."

4.2 Precariousness and career stability

Low pay is closely intertwined with rising levels of precariousness in the ACH sectors. While freelancing and other forms of self-employment have long been important in certain ACH sub-sectors, the sector overall is increasingly characterised by precarious conditions affecting both these workers and those in ostensibly more secure employment relationships.

Certain phrases and themes recurred across interviews, irrespective of the job or demographic background. For example, *"Job security is quite probably a big factor"* and *"it gave me a lot of security in ways that theatre just never did."* The interviewees clearly recognised precariousness as a persistent problem: *"the whole sector is just so precarious"*. This precarity was often contrasted with the stability offered by new occupations and sectors: *"now I have stability. I have a pension, I have a contract, I have, you know, permanent status."*

Deciding to leave for more secure and less precarious employment was often accompanied by ambivalence, if not outright regret. A middle-class, White woman in her fifties, who moved from audience-related work in the arts to a role in human resources at a large company, described this tension:

"I just felt like I really would struggle without that regular security. So I've kind of made that, I made that decision a long time ago… I am lucky to be in a secure job, and I've felt really grateful for that since the pandemic and during, so I think it's about trying not to give myself too much of a hard time because I think I… I mean I am very hard on myself, and I have felt like you know, oh, am I a bit of a failure for having done this?"

This question of perceived failure for not 'making it' in ACH is explored in Sub-section 4.6. For the current discussion, it provides insights into how workers navigate the tension between precarity and the desire to work in ACH.

The struggle for security, as with pay, is closely linked to broader sector inequalities. A White woman in her fifties, from a working-class background, who left theatre to enter the health sector, explained these challenges:

"You know, it's a pretty hard life being creative and working class, and having to, you know, fund your own life because you don't get regular work, and you know, unless you strike it lucky and I live…, I don't live in London. I live outside London. It's not that easy. I don't know if it would even be that easy if I was in London, to be honest with you. It's, you know, it's a tough, it's a tough world, really the creative industries. So yeah, I suppose there's a bit of pressure to always get a qualification and earn money."

Another example of how insecure work affects diversity in the sector comes from a White woman in her thirties, from a middle-class background, who moved from music into education. She reflected: *"It's becoming almost impossible for anyone to become a freelance musician, or possibly even any sort of freelance artist without some family money behind them, because I just… How do people rent in London, which is where all the work is still? With, when they're sort of at the beginnings of a career, I mean it's like it's £1,000 to rent a room in London now."*

In other cases, leaving ACH occupations coincided with broader changes in people's lives. One participant, a mixed-race woman in her early sixties from a middle-class background, had separated from her partner since the first interview. She *"suddenly realised that it was my husband's salary that had been subbing my ventures in freelancing, because I'd been freelance for years really, years and years. But I found towards the end of that period that I was spending 90% of my time chasing or pitching."* This experience of having a low income, combined with no longer being in a dual-income household, provided the impetus to move into a different occupation.

4.3 Childcare

The housing crisis in London is not the responsibility of the ACH sectors, nor indeed of cultural policy more broadly. However, these wider social policy challenges have a hugely significant influence on career decisions. They are particularly relevant for people in ACH occupations, given the high concentration of workers in London and the sector's distinctive patterns of work. This is perhaps most apparent in relation to caregiving responsibilities, notably childcare.

For interviewees with children, this tension was not hypothetical. It underpinned the decision to seek more supportive forms of work. It is important to note that this tension impacted men as well as women, as one of the men mentioned the balance between freelancing and having a young family. However, those highlighting childcare issues were disproportionately women.

At worst, even formal cultural organisations were unwilling to support women with caregiving responsibilities, as discussed by a White woman in her forties, with from a middle-class background, who had moved from the arts into the education sector:

"And the reason that this came to an end was because of my having to juggle childcare and having to do school pickups. They basically wanted somebody who would work nine to five, five days a week or nine to 5:30pm. And I was like, look, it works for me to be 8:30am till 2:45pm if that's okay. And they're like, no, we actually do need someone who's got more sort of flexibility and can be that bit more committed. So they were able to bring on somebody full time to do it, which is fine. I was sad to go."

The 'push' of leaving in this example is complemented by the 'pull' of sectors with more formal forms of support, as a woman in her forties from a working-class background commented, *"the reason why also I chose education was because I knew it had a maternity plan."* Careers and sectors offering flexibility and support stood in sharp contrast to the situation in ACH, where caregiving responsibilities often signalled the end of career progression for the women in our interview sample.

4.4 Career progression

Having children played an important role in stalling women's ACH careers, as caregiving responsibilities were seen as incompatible with the ways careers in those sectors develop. Expectations of long hours, limited flexibility and the importance of networking have all been extensively discussed in the literature on gender inequalities in ACH sectors.

Our interviewees reinforced these findings, recalling how caregiving responsibilities made them *"less visible"* to networks and *"potentially missing out on opportunities… around those networking opportunities and… that's because I have to go home to my children."*

These additional barriers to progression must be considered within a broader context in which career advancement is slowing across the sector. According to the same White, middle-class woman in her 40s who had moved from the arts into the education sector and commented on childcare issues: *"it's just really tough to make a go of it in this industry. And it seems like to get a salary bump in any kind of arts and heritage, you've got to step sideways into some kind of industry, something where you can be paid a bit more, gather experience and then come back in at a higher rate because you're just not going to get promoted from within. It's really tough."*

This sentiment was echoed by several other participants, whether in passing remarks about reaching career ceilings – *"It was only when she was to leave that I could have a career progression"* – or in anecdotes that shaped their sense of limited advancement: *"the woman at [my organisation], I will never forget, she was like 'to get a job above what you're in now, someone would have to leave or die.'"* These sentiments were not limited to women. A White, working-class origin man in his thirties, grounded his decision to leave publishing and retrain in the health sector in the fact that *"there's no kind of career progression or earning more money."*

Another White man in his thirties from a middle-class background, reporting on his move from theatre to the health sector, offered a similar reflection, this time focused on the restricted progression routes available in freelance creative careers: *"You know, there comes a point with it where either you want to be someone who runs a building or you don't".* In the context of changing career prospects after 2020, he added: *"I guess a growing sense through 2020, and you know it's only been sort of proven, I think in the last kind of couple of years, that the pandemic would just lead to a massive shrinking of the amount of work available."* This final point connects directly to the broader and hugely significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on ACH employment.

4.5 Post-pandemic recovery and sustainability in the ACH sectors

Barriers to career progression are closely linked to increasing pressures on the ACH sectors. Local and national funding challenges, alongside difficulties in developing financially sustainable business models in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, intersect with long-standing inequalities within the sector.

At its most extreme, these pressures resulted in one participant being made redundant very suddenly: *"the funding got cut from [cultural funder], and I basically got told on the Wednesday that 'oh, we can't pay you after Friday.'"* While this is an outlier in the dataset, redundancies were more widely experienced as a consequence of the pandemic: *"I was furloughed for quite a long time before I was made redundant… to be honest, when I was looking for a new job, there was no arts jobs going, at least in my work obviously, because they were letting people go, they weren't advertising. Yeah, and obviously I need to pay my mortgage and you know, all the bills and everything. I needed to get a job."* Freelancers, with no formal employee status, faced even more severe challenges as opportunities shrank or disappeared entirely: *"So it was, what, how many months is that, be like nearly 18 months of like, you know, nothing."*

As reopening proceeded after the pandemic, both the sector and individuals' approaches to ACH careers changed. One White woman in her sixties from a middle-class background left the theatre sector, reflecting that *"after Covid, I really thought I'm not enjoying this now. It's really not fun… really overnight, everything collapsed theatrically. We just saw job after job, after job. It was like dominoes. There were no theatre shows or anything. There was a point. I was just saying to someone the other day, it felt like it was never going to come back."*

As noted at the start of Section 4, individual decisions to change careers are shaped by diverse narratives and justifications. Yet the sense of crisis in the sector following the pandemic was striking across the interviews. As already demonstrated, the organisation of work in the sector, precarity and limited career progression, combined with a general sense of a sector in decline, represent significant challenges for policy interventions. The challenges are clearly becoming particularly acute when the prevailing story of the sector is summed up as, *"it's just funding cuts. People are down, people are quite down."* Even participants with relatively stable work noted that the pandemic exposed pre-existing vulnerabilities in the sector, as one White man in his late thirties observed: *"the pandemic exposed what were already structural challenges as a freelance theatre actor and the complete lack of a safety net… it solidified a sense of wanting to do something else."*

For careers to be sustainable, interventions must address burnout and exhaustion. The sense of exhaustion was common in the interviews, as exemplified by a White woman in her forties, of middle-class origin, who moved from the arts into the health sector: *"I was kind of exhausted and kind of working in a vocation that was really demanding and still made… making ends meet difficult, and I got to the point where… I just didn't have it in me to sort of continue in that".* A White woman in her fifties from a working-class background reported also moving from the arts into the health sector because, *"I couldn't foresee a way to keep working, keep contributing, which really matters to me, keep making a difference just always mattered to me. And working at that pace for that little remuneration, it was getting harder."*

4.6 Culture as a vocation

The sentiment closing the previous Sub-section, of work in culture mattering and making a difference, is a hugely significant point for our analysis. It was shared widely across the interview dataset, aligns with the broader research literature and serves as a reminder of why ACH jobs matter.

Leaving the sector was not easy for many of our interviewees, who described *"a very difficult, quite painful decision"* despite more attractive working conditions and career stability in other professions. A sense of missing their previous roles was evident, alongside the possibility of returning to ACH roles in the future. A White, working-class origin woman in her forties, who had moved from the arts into retail, captured this vividly: *"being an artist. It's like it's such a strong part of your identity. It's not just like what you do, it's who you are. And so you stop… it's so much part of your identity that you don't even think about questioning it… You get stuck in a rhythm of, like sort of plodding through, you know, your day-to-day without ever stopping to question if you're still happy doing it."*

This sense of questioning often emerged in the contrast between ACH roles and careers that were more sustainable, albeit less inspiring, particularly for those with caregiving responsibilities. While income, salary and financial security were prominent considerations in leavers' narratives, they were weighed against the personal and professional value of cultural work.

These reflections do not suggest that work outside the ACH sectors is without challenges. Sexism and experiences of marginalisation related to caregiving responsibilities persisted in new roles. This indicates that policy interventions that simply import working arrangements from other sectors may just reproduce some of the same issues that initially prompted leavers to seek alternative careers.

Finally, the importance of ACH work to leavers is evident in the concept of transferable skills. Several leavers spoke of the wealth of skills they brought with them from ACH roles to their new occupations, particularly those skills associated with creativity. This was reflected in descriptions of working practices, efforts to connect artists or creative workers with opportunities on projects in the leavers' new roles and in the way that unique skills developed in ACH sectors had enabled leavers to thrive in roles in other sectors. As work in ACH becomes increasingly pressured and less sustainable, policymakers would do well to recognise the value of leavers to other sectors, as part of the aim in the Industrial Strategy to integrate key ACH sectors into broader economic growth.

5 Discussion and conclusions

Career sustainability is a major challenge for the ACH sector. We know a great deal about the factors likely to bring careers to an end, but there is comparatively little research on who leaves, particularly in terms of their destinations and their motivations. This report has mapped out the distribution and characteristics of departures from ACH occupations. Its longitudinal qualitative study has also added insights around the motivations for leaving these occupations.

The majority of people leaving ACH roles move into other occupations, with most transitioning into managerial or professional roles. This pattern is particularly evident for short-term changes. However, over a longer time horizon, a larger proportion exit the workforce entirely to engage in activities such as family caregiving. In these cases, people are more likely to report voluntary or personal reasons for leaving. This difference across time scales is unlikely to be a methodological artefact and appears to reflect distinct patterns of practice. In contrast, those moving to another occupation are more often leaving at the end of a fixed-term contract or following redundancy in ACH.

The characteristics of people leaving ACH occupations are unevenly distributed. They are disproportionally likely to be 35 or younger and to have been employed rather than self-employed. There is also tentative evidence that disabled people are more likely to have left these occupations. No significant differences are observed by gender or ethnicity across our approaches to measurement.

Our analysis enables a comparative consideration of different characteristics, helping to identify whether observed patterns are distinctive to ACH occupations or reflective of broader trends across occupations with similar labour conditions, or indeed across the workforce as a whole.

This analysis highlights several distinctive characteristics of ACH occupations. Gender is particularly notable: women working in ACH occupations are more likely to move to other occupations than women working in other parts of the economy, and they are less likely to become economically inactive. Self-employed people in ACH are less likely than self-employed people in other sectors to leave for other occupations. This difference is only evident over a longer time horizon, where changes in activity are measured differently. Disabled workers in ACH are also slightly less likely than people working in other occupations to exit the workforce entirely.

The longitudinal qualitative research deepens our understanding of these quantitative patterns, providing insights into people's motivations for leaving and their subsequent experiences. Several participants cited ACH work conditions as a contributory factor when they decided to leave. Persistent low pay, precarious employment that makes long-term planning difficult and limited progression opportunities all contributed to the perception that careers in the sector were challenging to maintain over the long term. In contrast, the participants reflected positively on their pay, conditions and progression opportunities in their new roles.

The respondents also distinguished between ACH working conditions before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Broadly speaking, they did not attribute responsibility to individuals or organisations, recognising that a changing funding landscape, where a larger number of people were in pursuit of a smaller amount of funding, created the conditions that led to their departures. This suggests that interventions aimed at reducing attrition, addressing skills gaps or mitigating inequalities in these sectors cannot be the responsibility of individual organisations alone; structural changes across the ACH sectors are required.

This contrast between sectors presents a mixed picture for ACH. Although the conditions in the sector make it challenging to retain experienced workers, as is particularly critical in an environment where the retention of skilled workers is a crucial part of the sector strategy, our respondents spoke positively of how they were continuing to use the skills they developed in their previous ACH roles.

Structural challenges are compounded by the incompatibility of ACH work with caregiving responsibilities for children or other family members. While not exclusive to women, the burden of care reported was strongly gendered. Participants indicated that the issue was not the impossibility of more supportive work practices but that existing arrangements simply followed long-standing norms, particularly affecting freelancers. This is an area where targeted interventions could be particularly effective.

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings point to key issues. Low pay in ACH occupations, as documented and discussed in our previous State of the Nations report (McAndrew et al, 2025), drives unequal departures and contributes to skill loss. Working conditions are challenging for those with caregiving responsibilities, although this issue extends beyond the ACH sector.

The mixed-methods research also reveals substantial differences between the experiences of employed and self-employed workers in ACH roles. Several of our findings resonate with Arts Council England's commissioned research on the freelance workforce (Tyler et al, 2024). While our study captures a broader group and defines 'self-employment' as being a broader category than 'freelance' work, there are nonetheless important shared areas of concern, notably low pay and limited progression opportunities. In our study, however, we find that self-employed people in ACH occupations are less likely than employed people to leave these occupations. This is not necessarily because self-employed people enjoy better conditions; it may mean that self-employed people have fewer opportunities to apply their skills in other occupational settings. This highlights the need for focused policy attention and further research on self-employed workers in the sector.

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Data statement

The process through which the qualitative data was collected and analysed is described in full in Sub-section 2.2 of this report. The qualitative data cannot be shared because of the agreement with interviewees. Aside from the qualitative data, all data used in this report is available via the links provided in the data reference list.

Glossary

Arts, culture and heritage (ACH) occupations are occupations that focus on preserving, promoting, creating and interpreting artistic, cultural and historical works and sites. The set of occupations we classify as ACH occupations can be found in Section 2.

Career sustainability describes the extent to which individuals can maintain stable employment, income and job satisfaction over time.

Creative industries refer to industries that have creativity at their core. Definitions of creative industries vary in different countries.

Destination (of leavers) is the status reported after leaving ACH occupations: moving to other occupations, unemployed or inactive.

Economic inactivity is the status of not being in paid work and not actively seeking work. In the Labour Force Survey, this group includes students in full-time education who are not seeking work, carers looking after family or the home, people who are long-term sick or disabled and unable to work, and those who have retired early or are otherwise not seeking employment.

The **Labour Force Survey (LFS)** is a study of the employment circumstances of the UK population conducted by the Office for National Statistics. It is the largest household study in the UK and provides the official measures of employment and unemployment.

Multinomial logistic regression (MLR) is a statistical model used to estimate which factors are associated with different outcomes. In this report, the outcomes are whether people leave arts, culture and heritage occupations for other occupations, or whether they leave the workforce altogether.

NS-SEC II denotes lower managerial and professional occupations within the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). NS-SEC is a system used in the UK to classify individuals based on their occupation and employment status, providing a measure of social position or class.

Retrospective data is information people report about their activity at an earlier point in time. In this report, it is drawn from the Labour Force Survey second-quarter interviews (April to June), where respondents report their activity one year earlier.

A **self-employed** person is someone who runs their business for themselves and is responsible for its success or failure. This includes freelancers, sole traders, partners or company directors.

Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) is a common classification of occupational information based on the type of work performed in the UK. The SOC system organises occupations into a hierarchy of four levels, from the broadest major groups to specific unit groups.

Unemployment is the status of people who are not in work but actively seeking work. It is treated as a distinct destination from economic inactivity.

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