

Arts, Culture and Heritage sectors losing skilled employees due to low pay, limited progression and lack of flexibility according to new Creative PEC research.

Embargoed Wednesday 19 November 2025

Women are more likely to leave Arts, Culture and Heritage (ACH) jobs according to a new report published today by the AHRC funded - Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC). While the Government has just increased emphasis on creative education in schools and has identified the creative industries as a key economic growth sector in its Industrial Strategy, today's research looks at ACH as a key sub-sector in the creative industries and finds low pay, limited progression and a lack of flexibility continues to hamper its ability to retain employees.

The report **'Who Stays and Who Leaves? Mapping Arts, Culture and Heritage Careers'** finds exit rates from the sector are higher compared with other occupations. ACH jobs rely on a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce, with freelancers forming the vital backbone (comprising approximately 59% of the ACH workforce). However, the new analysis highlights structural vulnerabilities, especially in retaining early and mid-career workers, and shows the need for improved workforce support. Tailored support for freelancers is also shown to be critical, supporting the announcement in the DCMS Creative Industries Sector Plan to appoint a new Freelance Champion.

The study - based on multiple approaches including fresh analysis of the Labour Force Survey from 2015 - 2024 (yielding a vast data sample of 657,060, of whom 11,920 worked in arts, culture and heritage occupations at some point) and 120 qualitative interviews – has a robust basis for analysis, and finds:

- Self-employed and freelance workers are less likely to leave than employees, suggesting that they provide continuity for the sector but may stay freelance out of necessity rather than choice given limited opportunities for secure employment or progression.
- Most people leaving ACH careers move into managerial or professional roles in other sectors, pointing to a retention challenge.
- People aged 35 and younger are much more likely than people in other age groups to leave ACH occupations.
- Conditions are particularly challenging for people with caregiving responsibilities, with women being disproportionately affected. Women with children reported that the working hours in ACH jobs and schedules were often incompatible with family life.

The qualitative findings show ACH workers report relatively low pay, limited opportunities for progression and the challenges associated with precarious employment as characterising jobs in the sector. The chronic funding challenges across the ACH sectors as a whole were felt to be worsening working conditions. More positively the research found people who had moved to other occupations felt that the skills they had developed in ACH careers were transferable and therefore not lost. However, this comes at the cost of these skilled individuals leaving the sector and points to the need for improved working conditions.

Dr. Emily Hopkins, Policy Adviser, Creative PEC says:

“Targeted policy interventions to support the ACH workforce - and particularly freelancers - are vital, as chronic funding challenges and financial pressures continue to hamper the sector. Action is needed to provide further training opportunities and improve precarious conditions to avoid talented and highly educated workers leaving for other sectors - taking their institutional knowledge, skills and experience with them. It’s particularly troubling to see women finding jobs in the sector are often incompatible with caring responsibilities, which is something the whole industry should be turning its attention to, and finding solutions.”

In terms of incompatibility with caring responsibilities, the challenges identified included low pay, the need for out-of-hours networking for career advancement and the frequent need to work out of hours (e.g. for events, touring, weekend workshops, evening performances).

Creative PEC's The Good Work Review research points to ACH jobs being less unionised and

managers in these sectors having less training, which could contribute to the problems experienced when women look to return to the workplace.

Dr Mark Taylor, Lead Report Author, University of Sheffield says:

“Our report shows developing and maintaining a career in arts, culture and heritage is challenging for everyone, but that there are some groups whose departures are higher than others. The qualitative findings reinforce the importance of appropriate pay and progression opportunities. However, reassuringly for the individuals, we also find that people who leave arts, culture and heritage occupations have been able to use their skills effectively in other lines of work.”

Six times Olivier Award Winner, Paule Constable, a freelance lighting designer (credits include War Horse and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time) commented on the report findings:

“It’s a common misunderstanding that we are all happily freelance by choice. That is often not the case. Jobs such as my own, actors, directors, casting directors, musicians: we are all freelance by necessity - there are no longer any salaried positions in these disciplines in this country. We need to strategically ensure that support for skilled freelancers is built into the government’s growth vision for our shared future. The government’s commitment to a freelance champion is an opportunity to start this work. We must focus on rebuilding trust and moving from discussion to action.”

In launching the new report the Creative PEC is holding an event at The Royal Society of Arts (and online) at 2.30 today (19 November) in which a panel of guests - Alexander Jacob, freelance television director and Directors UK member, Yasmin Khan, Director for Individual Practitioners, Arts Council England, Philippa Childs, from the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and theatre Union (Bectu) and Amy Tarr, Creative UK – will explore the findings particularly in relation to what more can be done to support freelancers in the sector. Event link: https://pec.ac.uk/event_entries/the-creative-freelancers-experience/

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Download the report: https://pec.ac.uk/state_of_the_nation/mapping-arts-culture-heritage-careers/

(live from Wednesday 19 November 2025)

The report: 'Who Stays and Who Leaves? Mapping Arts, Culture and Heritage Careers' is by Dave O'Brien (University of Manchester), Mark Taylor and Ruoxi Wang (University of Sheffield), Peter Campbell (University of Liverpool) and Kate Shorvon (University of Manchester). It is published by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, which is led by Newcastle University with the Royal Society of Arts and funded by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

The research team and spokespeople for the Creative PEC are available for comment and interview.

Press contacts

Alice Kent alice.kent@pec.ac.uk (Monday-Wednesday) and Simon Jones (Thursday - Friday) simon.jones@pec.ac.uk

Notes to editors

1. State of the Nations reports

The report is part of the Creative PEC's State of the Nations research series, which uses the latest data to inform policymakers on how best to support the creative sector across four thematic areas. Regular reports on each area will be published annually over the five years of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding period.

2. About the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC)

Creative PEC works to support growth of the UK's Creative Industries through the production of independent and authoritative evidence and policy advice. Led by Newcastle University with the Royal Society of Arts and funded by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Centre comprises a core consortium of; Newcastle University, Work Advance, Sussex University and the University of Sheffield. The PEC works with a diverse range of industry partners.

For more details visit www.pec.ac.uk, follow us on [LinkedIn](#) and [Bluesky](#), or [sign up to our newsletter](#).

3. About The UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council

The UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of UK Research and Innovation, funds internationally outstanding independent researchers across the whole range of the arts and humanities: history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages and literature, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and much more. The quality and range of research supported by AHRC works for the good of UK society and culture and contributes both to UK economic success and to the culture and welfare of societies across the globe.

4. 'Who Stays and Who Leaves? Mapping Arts, Culture and Heritage Careers was designed by Mike Green at Green Doe Graphic Design