

Summary of Open Events for Touring Research

Introduction

This is a summary of two events, on 2/12/24 (pm) and 10/12/24 (am) about touring in England (or by organisations based in England). The events were open invitation and aimed to ensure that the research being undertaken for Arts Council England covers the areas that the sector itself feels most useful.

During the second session, we ran a poll to as what types of organisations were present (respondents could give multiple responses). See table (right):

The make-up of organisations was similar in the first session, although we did not run a poll.

The events were structured around discussions based on four themes (each introduced briefly by a ‘provocation’, usually by a member of the project’s External Reference Group¹) namely:

- The state of the current touring ecology
- Financial risk and partnership
- Audience and programme trends
- Programme and product: length and location of tours.

Org/Role Type	No.	%
Theatre	57	55%
Producer	42	40%
Dance	35	34%
Other	30	29%
Artist	26	25%
Music	21	20%
Receiving Venue	16	15%
Opera	5	5%

After each of the discussions themed around these areas, participants were asked to vote in a poll, to indicate the extent to which they felt the discussion represented a consensus position among those involved, or whether there were substantial gaps or disagreements on that topic (‘Did this discussion broadly reflect your views on this topic and cover the most important points? [if no, please also comment in the chat]’). The results were as follows:

¹ In one case the provocation was read out by one of the project team, due to the speaker being unavailable due to travel; in another, it was provided by a member of the research team, since we had not been able to secure an external speaker at short notice.

	2 nd Dec		10 th Dec		Combined	
Topic	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
The state of the current touring ecology	53 (87%)	8 (13%)	87 (91%)	9 (9%)	140 (89%)	17 (11%)
Financial risk and partnership	37 (71%)	15 (29%)	66 (72%)	26 (28%)	103 (72%)	41 (28%)
Audience and programme trends	25 (56%)	20 (44%)	62 (74%)	22 (26%)	87 (67%)	42 (33%)
Programme and product: length and location of tours	27 (64%)	15 (36%)	63 (80%)	16 (20%)	91 (75%)	31 (25%)

This suggests that although there was broad consensus around the overall state of the touring ecology, there was either disagreement about, or desire for other key points to be raised in relation to, the other three topics. This was particularly the case in the meeting on 2nd December. Overall, these results indicate a need for more exploration of these topics through the next stages of the research, especially the focus groups.

In addition, participants were asked to highlight, during a breakout group, other areas that it would be important for the research to cover, highlights of which were then fed back to all participants by a delegated speaker. These were then collated and voted on among the full participants (with up to three votes per person) to give an indication of those most important to take forward, although all comments (whether spoken or in the meeting ‘chat’) will also be borne in mind during the project.

Participants said that it was useful to have the discussions and that they would appreciate access to transcripts or recordings to revisit or share. Since we’d said that all contributions would be anonymous, we’ve not done that directly. Hopefully, however, this summary provides many of the benefits, while also being more readable, providing access to content from both sessions to participants from either, and still preserving anonymity.

Finally, it is perhaps worth reiterating that this is only an initial step in the research: there will be many more contributions by those within the touring sector via the survey, focus groups, interviews, literature review and a pre-reporting ‘meaning making event’ to discuss the

findings. The research team are grateful for the time and insight shared to help us to address the important challenges that have already been highlighted within these sessions and look forward to discussing them with sector colleagues further, over the coming months.

For more background in the project, see: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/research-and-data/touring-research-2024> - more background on the project, or to contribute to the survey, see: <https://research.audiencesurveys.org/Interview/845aa77d-a0ff-4570-99aa-76a3e6bcefe4>

The Discussion

Some key areas of discussion were as follows:

The Current Touring Ecology

Participants discussed the overall situation at present, highlighting the many current challenges and the pressures they put on touring (for companies and venues, as well as individual artists and members of staff). These were described as pre-dating the pandemic, made up of many interconnected issues, and growing worse. Several organisations provided summaries of their own organisation's situation and journey, giving perspectives from different art forms, parts of the country and scales of touring. There was discussion of the impacts on emerging artists and those undertaking touring for the first time, as well as detailing the effects at small- and mid- scale (including the similarities and differences between those scales). There was also discussion of the role of place-based and community work: emphasising its benefits but also some challenges it brings in terms of touring organisations and work (picked up in later discussions around Arts Council England's strategy *Let's Create*).

The Effect of Financial Pressures

Participants detailed the effects of financial pressures (driven by rising costs as well as pressures on income from audiences). These were particularly in relation to touring companies and venues (with each recognising the pressures on the other) as well as on what work gets programmed (including more risk averse programming). Impacts included pressure on ticket prices, availability of tour dates, length of runs, increased competition for (and/or reductions in) funding, changing deals (inc. lower guarantees) and more. Beyond the specific impacts, there was also a sense of a change of culture and related loss of the 'generosity' that the sector has historically relied on (especially towards newer companies and supporting a more diverse sector).

Funding and Financing

The role of funding and financing was discussed at length. Several participants emphasised the essential role of funding (including that much touring is impossible without it), as well as the difference that receiving NPO or project funding made. Funding timelines often caused problems, making tours difficult to plan due to the uncertainty. Some queried whether funded and non-funded organisations (whether touring or venues) should operate the same deals or not (e.g. should funded venues be less commercial in their terms, or deals reflect whether a tour has funding). There was discussion of changes to organisational models (inc. 'portfolio' approaches, shifts in geography - whether staying local or touring more internationally - and changes to cross-subsidy).

Cross-subsidy was highlighted both as necessary parts of business models (e.g. from international work, or a few key commercial dates of a tour) but also because it was reducing (as all parts of a programme, or tour, were now having to cover their own costs - a challenge for both venues and touring companies). Several organisations spoke about touring at a loss in the UK (offset by spending down reserves, NPO funding, or income from elsewhere). Theatre Tax Relief was mentioned as one vehicle for cross-subsidy and in general as an important income stream: but one which also creates challenges for cash flow (because it is paid in arrears).

Deals and Partnership

Deals are clearly changing (and getting less favourable to touring companies), both recently and on a longer timescale. There were reports of greater use of contras by venues [i.e. charges] and reduced terms (or the same levels as ten or twenty years earlier, so a substantial real terms reduction). There was a perceived need for more partnership working (perhaps brokered by ACE?) and collaborative approaches in general. This was particularly highlighted as useful for new and emerging artists, who may not have existing connections. Whilst it was suggested that some benefit could be realised from improved partnership working, there was also caution about being too critical about partnership in the sector, since the difficulties reflected the situation and other pressures, rather than people's ability or willingness to work together. Some specific practicalities and challenges of existing partnerships were raised (particularly around the need for clearer communications in some cases, good communication was highlighted as a key factor where there is successful partnership working). The management (and effects of) cancellations were also a key topic (connected to sales pressures

and funding timelines). There was some concern around art form expertise in venues and knowledge of, and willingness to come to, different parts of the country, expressed by touring companies and venues respectively.

People

Behind many conversations, there was a keen awareness of the individual impacts of the issues raised: the pressures, precarity and unpaid labour involved. There was a recognition that capacity was over-stretched, teams were reduced, and that some skills were lacking: there was particular focus on the lack of availability of technical specialists, as well as the reductions in headcount and loss of skills to other sectors. Low pay for artists was highlighted, as were the need for better tour digs, despite the added cost pressures this creates. There was a recognition that touring needs to provide better welfare and also that this might be necessary to counter an increasing reluctance to tour for both staff and performers.

Audiences

Audiences were discussed at length. Changes to behaviour were noted (reduced sales, the impact of the cost of living - including on Pay What You Decide models -, regional differences) as well as changes to product preferences towards 'safer' and more popular work (e.g. comedy and musicals) with some push-back that this could be overstated and that venues in particular could be being too risk-averse. Diversification of product was suggested by some as a way of reducing risk and dependence on narrow audiences. Pricing and communications strategies were discussed, with concern about perceived need for discounting, and emphasising the importance of social media (including the role of niche fandoms, rather than 'omnivores'). Various ways to engage audiences were discussed, including audience development approaches (with concerns about skills and resourcing, especially from venues) and community engagement. The latter was seen as both important but also a threat to touring approaches, since it relied on either long residencies or local artists. Touring's potential for important contributions in this area also wasn't seen as being clear in *Let's Create*. There was also discussion about specific audience groups, particularly schools (seeing a significant decrease) younger audiences and ensuring full accessible product for disabled audiences (but concern that financial pressures could threaten venues fulfilling this commitment).

Risk

Many of the conversations came round to discussions of risk: appetite for it, how other pressures increase it, who takes it (or bears the cost of it) and how it can be managed. There was concern that financial risk is increasingly placed on individuals, or smaller companies, with direct negative effects (pressure, reduction in activity, loss of sustainability) but also effects on representativeness in the sector (i.e. that you increasingly need access to other resources or the ability to offset risk: which is only possible for the most well-off). There was also concern about artistic risk: both that such work was decreasingly programmed but also about the desirability of both innovative and controversial work, both of which felt threatened. There was also a call to distinguish between meanings of 'risk': where there is uncertainty of financial return versus a something that was expected to be loss-making.

Suggested Other Topics

A wide range of additional topics were suggested. After each breakout, we asked the groups to list key additional topics and then vote on the three most important. The results were:

2nd December Session:

Topic	No.	%
Look at the big picture, the whole system across the board	25	69%
Let's Create - and how it can support touring better	22	61%
Where is the space for innovation and risk?	20	56%
It's a much bigger issue and can't be summarised in a single point, or this session	16	44%
Skills development and sustainability of the workforce	11	31%
Is there a need to do less (to reduce pressure on funding)	9	25%
Paying artists	5	14%
The green agenda	2	6%

10th December Session:

Topic	No.	%
Fundamental need for more funding, and new models	35	52%
How funding is allocated to touring, and the proportion to touring vs wider sector	21	31%
How can ACE support successful work to tour	19	28%
Honesty about audiences and costs of touring	18	27%
Proper representation from the whole ecology and the whole country	16	24%
Articulating the importance of touring	16	24%
Missing voices from this research, and limited scope of this work	15	22%
Lack of communication and equity in relationships	14	21%

Let's Create	12	18%
Are we trying to do too much for too little?	11	16%
Hidden costs and the need for unpaid labour	9	13%
Gatekeepers & brokering more collaborations	9	13%

Wider discussion also placed emphasis on more coverage of:

- Sustainability (the need for, but challenges from, environmentally informed approaches)
- Racism (and its impact on artists' ability to tour and work)
- Wellbeing and inclusion (ensuring that the sector is a sustainable place to work, for everyone)
- Commercial income (other potential revenue opportunities)
- Touring as art-form development (how touring informs and shares development of art forms and why this is important)
- ACE strategy (how *Let's Create* works for touring, how touring can relate to community engagement and place-based work, and the balance of funding for touring compared to other activity)
- ACE operations/processes (how particular processes can be improved, e.g. funding timescales)
- Doing less (some participants suggesting that the sector may need to confront an unfortunate necessity, that with less money available, doing less is essential to avoid being over-stretched).
- Innovation (ways to enable and share it).

Comments on the Research

We invited feedback on the research process itself, as well as the topics to be covered. There was some concern about whether the project was feasible, since it was such a large and challenging topic (although one which participants clearly valued being addressed). Much of the concern raised was specific to the idea of representativeness: of the Reference Group, of those at the open events (or giving provocations) and who would be involved in future. There was a lot of discussion about the project focussing on 150+ seat venues (and therefore not covering smaller scale, non-venue-based work and rural work). The interconnected nature of the touring ecology was emphasised by several participants. There was also specific concern about certain art forms or parts of the sector not being given enough prominence (e.g. festivals

and puppetry, among others). The needs for geographical balance, between the north and south in particular, was also raised (and a suggestion that the reference group did not reflect this).

Participants noted that the use of the chat and discussion simultaneously in the session was difficult to follow and inaccessible. There was also a tension between the events being a significant time commitment (thus limiting who could take part) whilst others highlighted that there was a lot to try to cover in a comparatively limited period.