

State of the Studios: Merseyside 2021

*A report for the Artist Studio Network
Merseyside, compiled by Laura Brown & Art in
Liverpool C.I.C*

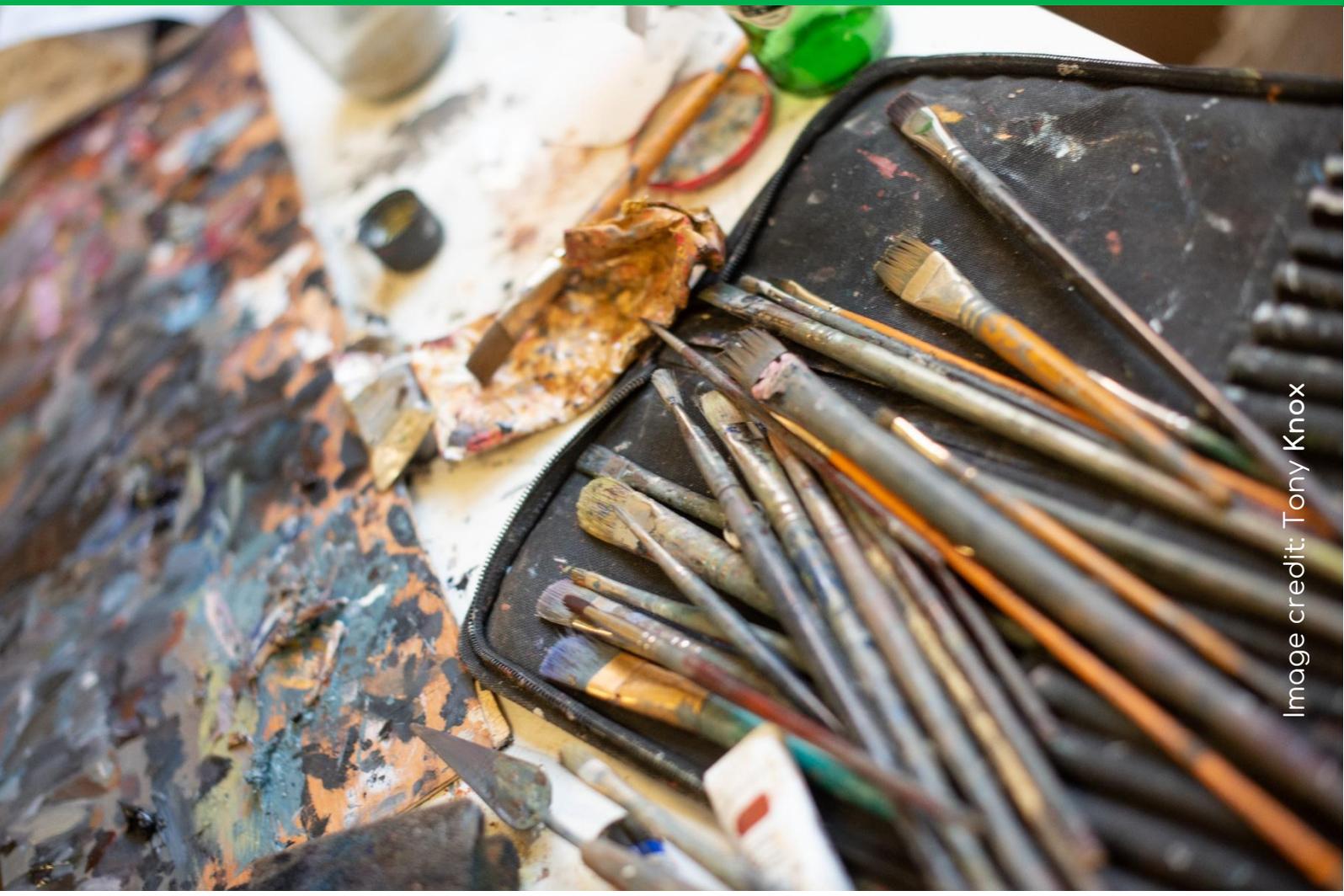


Image credit: Tony Knox

Artist Studio Network Merseyside, Report 2021

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Executive Summary

Who has compiled this report?

Laura Brown & Patrick Kirk-Smith with comments and support from Steering Group¹

What's the need?

This report is intended to clarify the gaps in studio provisions, and the need of better understanding from local authorities and national funding bodies of structural challenges faced by artist studios around the UK. Merseyside's studios have come together to form this network but these issues are national.

The network is a structure for mutual support, aimed at ensuring studios can weather collective challenges together. This will include funding issues, venue stability and artist development. Some issues pose challenges for industries bodies; some are challenges which need addressing within studios themselves; others are wider problems which need a collaborative approach - notably access and diversity within Merseyside's studio network, which, in part, need local authority intervention to make new ventures more attractive, in combination studio led action to improve their own attractions to Queer, Black and Disabled artists in particular.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic laid bare existing areas of crises in the arts, and artist studios were no different. A serious issue was raised by the Artist Studio Network in the first initial conversations highlighting the incongruity in the eligibility of funding for the first round of Emergency Cultural Funding. The description stated it was open to those who had been in receipt of public funding, which for Artist Studios left many feeling they were ineligible and thus did not apply. Many of the Artist Studios felt they did not know who to ask for advice and guidance on their eligibility. For studios who could have received funding, the delay led to a sense of isolation and a gap in their funds, which they have not been able to fill, even if they have been in receipt of later funding pots.

The problem is symptomatic of an issue of infrastructure in which artists' studios often feel they exist and operate outside of and are not considered as part of a wider arts scene and on a par with arts organisations. The lack of awareness of their existence, even within their local community, both in the arts and local government, means that when they are eligible for support, they do not know.

Like music venues, Artist Studios represent a cultural and artistic infrastructure that is vital for the development and continuation of a grassroots artistic community. Without them, their spaces will disappear and a vital resource will be lost.

¹ Artist Studio Network Merseyside's steering group members: Faye Hamblett-Jones (The Royal Standard), Fiona Filby (Bridewell Studios & Gallery), Tony Knox & Rob Flynn (ROAD Studios), Claire Weetman (Platform Studios)

As cultural regeneration forms a central role in the rebuilding of communities, post coronavirus, especially on high streets and in town centres, raising the profile of and the location of Liverpool City Region's artist studios helps local authorities and arts communities to recognise the talent and expertise that already exists on their doorstep, and allows them to work with these studios to begin recovery. If the strategy is to build back better, then improved communication with artist studios will help them to be part of that cultural infrastructure and regeneration.

Methodology

Compiled by Art in Liverpool C.I.C. and the Steering Group collaboratively. Reporting will be based mostly on minuted conversations. Some case studies which target studios facing specific challenges will be referenced in the main text and included in short in the appendix.

Key findings and questions

- Lack of perceived access to public funding (why?)
- How studio outputs have changed through the start of this century (how and why?)
- What is the kind of public presence studios desire?
- How studio practice relates to artists, and how it is perceived by artists with, and without studios.
- Why access and diversity is so poor across the board in studios.
- Why are studios still condensed around the city centre if access to the city centre is so poor? Geographic ease, or desire to stay connected?

What's next?

Following the publication of the initial report, Artist Studio Network will work with local authorities and interested parties to develop support plans for the network. These will be reported as amendments to this report online, and shared with network members and non-member studios (the network is in its early stages, and while membership is free for artist group studios we want to ensure every studio is engaged in a meaningful way within the network so will be clarifying membership in 2021).

This report focuses mainly on the financial, geographic and identity barriers that studios face. A follow up case study and action plan will be produced in 2021 focussed on improving access and diversity within Merseyside's studios.

Introduction

Artist Studio Network Merseyside

Overview

Liverpool City Region is home to 35 arts studios (further information on each is available in *The Local Picture*, p. 7) , with around 500 artists using them as workspaces, studios, exhibition space and storage.

This map gives an idea of their geographical spread across Liverpool City Region. The majority are in Liverpool and Wirral council areas. In Liverpool, they tend to be focused around the city centre and Baltic Triangle, while in other boroughs they are dispersed, mirroring the multiple civic centres of the surrounding boroughs.

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1SKkbEeyCIT1NVTkqS4FvA5rYpbCTUiu&usp=sharing>

The studios cover a wide range of art forms, depending on how much space they have and the trends in creativity. It includes painting, sculpture, textiles, video work, ceramics, letterpress, photography, stained glass, carpentry and furniture restoration and pottery. Engagement varies from studio to studio, some provide merely studio space, others have a gallery space, some host workshops and classes while others focus on allowing artists to have a quiet place to work.

Report scope

There is a challenge, as there often is within the arts, of definition. For clarity this report limits its focus to studios whose main output is visual art or craft. We know this excludes design, film and architecture studios, but it is likely the findings of this report will have resonance within their sector specific spaces.

The intention of this report is not to define what passes as art, but to support those individuals whose core professional identity is 'artist'.

Equally important is the distinction of studio from office space. Many artists in Merseyside use hot-desk space, or shared working spaces which are not studios. Their physical outputs might rely on studio resources, but their day-to-day environment is desk space. Art in Liverpool falls into this category, working from office space at Metal Liverpool, a complex which includes both office and studio provisions.

One September, creative producers and artists, also choose to base themselves in Metal's office space, rather than the adjoining studio building. Deborah Wintle-Escott from the collective explains:

“To some extent we were not based at the Cave long enough to make any real connections but enjoyed the diversity of artists around us and the colour that brought to daily life! [at Metal, we’re] allowed to feel that we’re not ‘stuck in an office’ but within a creative environment to suit all aspects of our work. Metal has had a meaningful impact with their support to our work and also connecting to other artists too – through other occupiers and also via events they have held and short-term resident artists. We are definitely thriving now and believe that is certainly in part due to the support as well as our own work of course!”

The focus on art studios also enables clearer contextualisation against historic and current figures from Arts Council England and other national reports relating to artist pay, and geographical spread.

NB:

Having identified and defined the artist studios included in this report it is also important to note that this is the first report of its kind, which seeks to highlight the state of current studio provisions on a local level. Therefore any comparisons from historic national statistics/reports will not be directly comparable as more direct contact with the report’s subject has been possible here (ie. the 2012 NFASP report² states a total of 144 studio organisations across the UK, but noticeably misses over 50% of Merseyside studios from its list). Similarly, the Livelihoods of Visual Artists report by a-n for Arts Council England, presented the best possible data by surveying artists connected to the networks of the report’s national steering group, likely meaning a huge subset of un-networked artists were not included in the report (part of a wider problem which typically misses Black, East Asian and Arabic artists from surveys).

Neither of the above is a criticism of the validity of the reports, but should be noted so as not to present false comparisons between national and local reports.

Why are we doing this now?

Coronavirus has cast a long shadow over the creative world, where there were cracks there are now chasms. Issues of infrastructure, connectivity, profile and resource have been flung into sharp focus, be that the over reliance on freelancers, lack of sustainable working models and the fragility of funding and space. Many arts studios do not receive central government or local government funding. Restrictions on funding for arts practice often mean they are not eligible for it, and when they are the language or presentation of funding opportunities appears to exclude them.

² Cited in The National Picture section of this report

The understanding of most studios, and ourselves, when reading guidance for ACE Emergency Response Fund in April 2020 was that it was only open to those who had already received direct public funding, where they could have applied if they had *benefited* from public funding (eg. through a studio member paying rent from an ACE grant). Simple measures can be taken in future to ensure this is avoided.

The postponement of Independents Biennial 2020 left Art in Liverpool with time to support the informal network we had been working with since our foundation in 2004. Art in Liverpool was fortunate enough to receive an ERF grant from ACE, so had resources to set up and manage the network in its early stages, to ensure better resilience from grassroots arts in the future.

While coronavirus has been the catalyst for this report now, it is important to note that this situation has been worsening for a considerable period of time. Anecdotally, there is a sense of artist studios becoming pushed out, marginalised, and a sense that increased communication and a coordinated approach is needed to stem an irreparable fragility.

The Importance of arts studios

Working artists, in the visual arts particularly, play a vital role in a local creative economy and culture. Affordable studio space that is easy to access is an integral ingredient in enabling artists to be thriving creatives. Artists are generally low paid and on low incomes. Studio space, therefore, cannot operate on a parity with other creative industries like gaming, tech digital or creative agencies like marketing companies, for example. According to Arts Council England's [Livelihoods of Visual Artists](#)³ data report in 2019, artists earn an average of £16,150 each year (below the average median UK wage). £6,020 comes from their artist practice. The majority each less than £5k from their art, with 7% earning more than £20k. It is impractical, therefore, for artist studios to base their rent on a parity with other studio incomes or fees - an artist paying upwards of 50% of their income in studio rent is not fiscally prudent. Being an artist, making a living as an artist, is an increasingly rare achievable goal; one factor in making it feasible to make studios accessible and affordable. Increasingly, independent studios are exploring ways to support their artists financially, which will be looked at in detail below.

Affordable studio space plays an important role in an artists development. Rents are, on average, according to the National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers around a third of the open market⁴. If we value the work of visual artists and want them to contribute to our creative economy, then they need access to facilities at an affordable price. This means studios that are centrally located, or easy to get to, are secure and safe, especially if artists are working late at night, are accessible and well managed.

Artist studios are not merely beneficial to artists. They contribute to communities through exhibitions, open studio events, outreach programmes and public art projects that enhance the wellbeing and quality of life in an area.

“Artists’ studios can help populate a new area from the outset with friendly, welcoming people. Artists are often willing to work actively to build community life; as registered charities, most large studios are legally mandated to deliver public goods by meeting their charitable objectives. Many studios bring cafes and cultural amenities that can also serve the wider community. In this way, studios can offer a cost effective means of creating and managing community infrastructure, providing sustainable, self-financing returns to the community over the long term.”

Investing in Creative Communities: Artists’ Studios and the Housing Sector, NFASP Guidance 2014

³ The full report Artist Livelihoods, 2018, TBR has delivered this research with support from a-n The Artists Information Company and James Doeser
<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/livelihoods-visual-artists-report>

⁴ Investing in Creative Communities: Artists’ Studios and the Housing Sector, NFASP Guidance 2014
<http://nfasp.org.uk/system/files/ArtistsStudiosHousingSector.compressed.pdf>

The National Picture

The National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers (NFASP) was established in 2007 as the professional membership body for all those engaged in developing and managing affordable studios for artists in the UK.

Its mission was to secure, improve and increase affordable studio provision in the UK - we believe that affordable studio providers are key to the development, success and vibrancy of the arts by providing low-cost studio space to artists, who are generally on low incomes.

We pursued this mission by providing a range of advice and support to members and non-members and by campaigning to raise awareness of the sector at local and national level.

The Federation operated with revenue support from Arts Council England until 2012 when its core funding ceased and the professional staff team was gradually wound down after that.

The 2010 NFASP survey showed that there were 144 studio organisations managing 252 buildings and providing 5,450 studios for 7,250 artists in the UK, although it is estimated there is a greater number than this now.

The sector is vulnerable. It is harder for artist organisations, artists and those wanting to maintain studios to find affordable space within cities and a competitive property market. There is more vacant space available, but the challenge comes from the short term let or meanwhile space lease with funders highly unlikely to support any buildings related grants without a minimum twenty year lease. Underlying insecurity riddles the sector nationally. Affordable studio spaces can find their future erased by a building going up for sale. Lower rents from artists are less attractive than apartments. Very few studio buildings across the UK are owned and permanent. In Merseyside, this is only in Bridewell Studios that have this security. Platform in St Helens have more secure agreements as a council tenant than others may have in the region.

A decade ago, the NFASP survey found that, of the 214 buildings with studio space, 79% were rented and 21% owned. Many are on short term leases with 64% on leases shorter than five years. Across the UK, that meant 650 studios were under threat.

Art studios, which had played a major role in city centre led creative regeneration have largely been squeezed to the margins to make way for other, more profitable, buildings. Studio organisations deliver culture, community led and creative value. Supporting them to continue to exist within central locations makes the industry of the artist have as high a civic profile as the work they create.

In 2019, East Street Arts selected 20 artist-led organisations across England to join its GUILD project. The Arts Council England-supported initiative was created in 2018 by the Leeds-based organisation in partnership with a-n The Artist Information Company, Key Fund, University of Salford, University of Leeds, Stockholm Institute for Environment and Locality.

Over the next three years, [GUILD](#) will explore how towns and cities can develop and support artists' spaces. It will look at how spaces can sustain creative practice and how artists can work with developers and communities to create the kind of sustainable spaces that meet the changing needs of the sector. In doing it, it hopes to determine what form the artists' spaces of the future will take.

The Local Picture

Mapping studios and use

Where are art studios?

Liverpool City Region Studios Map

[Artist Studio Network Merseyside](#)

List of art studios

Studio	Borough
Aspen Yard	Liverpool
Bridewell Studios & Gallery	Liverpool
Platform Studios	St Helens
ROAD Studios	Liverpool
The Royal Standard	Liverpool
104 Duke Street Studios	Liverpool
Alternator Studios	Wirral
Arena Studios and Gallery	Liverpool
Altar Pottery	Liverpool
Baltic Clay	Liverpool
The Bluecoat	Liverpool
CBS Gallery & Framing	Liverpool
Convenience Galley	Wirral
Does Liverpool	Liverpool
dot-art Studio	Sefton
Hazlehurst Studios	Halton
Hub Art Studios and Gallery	Liverpool
Invisible Wind Factory	Liverpool

Make. Baltic	Liverpool
Make. North Docks	Liverpool
Make. Hamilton	Wirral
Merseymade	Liverpool
Metal Liverpool	Liverpool
Outpost Liverpool	Liverpool
Pink Sand Studios	Wirral
Rathbone Studios	Wirral
Rose Lane Studios	Liverpool
Scrapyard Studios	Sefton
Seagrass Studios	Wirral
Static Trading Ltd	Liverpool
Wellington Road Studios	Wirral
Zap Graffiti	Liverpool

There are studios in all boroughs of LCR, other than Knowsley. The majority are in postcodes on the outskirts of L1, with a condensed group in Birkenhead, Wirral. St Helens and Halton have one studio each with some spread out across Sefton (work needs to be done to connect with the Sefton groups)

The peripatetic nature of Liverpool's arts, and its studio community, follows a similar pattern as it does in other cities where there is development. Artists and arts organisations coalesce in an area where buildings are available and rents are cheap, the area becomes "cool" and sought after, rents increase, artists move on. Baltic and the area around Jamaica Street is currently a popular hub for artist studios on one side of the River Mersey, with a similar development of spaces in Birkenhead. .

Geography is important in terms of amenities. Generally speaking, the closer to the city centre and more expensive retail space results in smaller spaces and fewer add-ons like parking. It can also mean studios are further away from an artist's home and local community, requiring them to travel by public transport or cycling (which then adds another layer around transport infrastructure and access). Some studios outside of central locations might be popular in terms of being closer to home and offering more in terms of space.

What do they offer?

Studios offer artist space for collaboration and creative production. Increasingly this is an insular pursuit as space are squeezed out of public ready buildings into under-equipped sites typically without heating, and without disabled access for artists or the public. In spite of this, they are bustling hubs of creativity, enabling production on a scale and of an ambition not achievable without the support of creative peers.

Visible studio practice is crucially one of the biggest drivers in retaining and attracting graduate artists to the region. This has been the case in the past in Merseyside, but with the shift in priorities for developers, landlords and local authorities, attractive space is hard to come by. In many ways this has led to stronger collaborations and closer working relationships between artists within studio groups as they work to prove their worth through their work rather than their space.

Not all studios are in that position though, with some having outstanding production facilities alongside close working relationships with some of the largest galleries in the region.

Bridewell, Make. North Docks, Make. Hamilton Square, The Royal Standard, Baltic Clay, and the newly established Aspen Yard Studios have clear outputs external to studio artists. What is particularly noteworthy is the extent of the positive impact this has on their artists.

Increasingly, studios are examining ways in which they can support artists financially, if not in cash then via opportunity. During 2020, Make CIC, Hazelhurst, Platform and Merseymade have worked with tenants to make sure they were individually eligible for rates based grants.

Make. CIC has launched an Etsy shop for their studio holders. Merseymade and dot-art have sales outlets for their tenants following a more traditional studio model. While Hub studio members have a sales space in Liverpool's MetQuarter, it is branded separately to the studio, running an exhibition programme. There is a challenge that a shift in art forms has impacted saleable work across most of the other studio groups.

Who uses them?

Studios vary. Some studios specialise in one particular artist group, Zap Grafitti, for example work with a regular cohort of street artists, but also engage non-members in workshop and festival programme. This can give artists an opportunity to promote their work and benefit from having industry specific backing. Other studios are very insular but see events like Liverpool Open Studios (LOST) as being a key event. Open studios can lead to sales, but

more often than not are a way to open up to new audiences and share ideas between artists.

Shuffle, a project launched in 2019 by Max Mellander, one of The Royal Standard's artist lead, looks to build on this idea, sharing aspect of open studios - inviting studios to share spaces, swap them, and present outputs in new spaces altogether.

The use of studios depends on a number of factors; how artists use them, rather than what artists (and why artists chose not to); and how or if audiences see studios as an important part of the creative sector.

One question we have yet to answer is around the financial situation of artists with studio spaces, and what portion of their income is being spent on studios. While studios aren't something to be judged on their monetary value, and are far more precious to their artists than pounds and pence, it does help to expand our understanding of who is taking spaces and why; because while studios are precious beyond money, if you don't have enough you don't get in.

This alienates artists on low incomes, particularly from low income backgrounds as success in the arts has always been simpler for those from middle class backgrounds, a fact which hasn't changed in hundreds of years.

Studios can't afford to lower their rents under current circumstances, but with work to ensure discretionary rates relief, or support given to studio groups to apply for, and to maintain charitable status where applicable would certainly support this. In the same vein, funding to improve accessibility in spaces with short term leases would vastly improve attractiveness to disabled artists.

Artists at all career stages use studio space, and are typically loyal to their studio throughout their career; something often overlooked when considering the value in studio spaces. Graduate artists can benefit immensely from informal mentoring from established or mid-career artists. Arena Studios and The Royal Standard have both given either studio or residency space to graduates to develop their practices as graduate awards in the past, which hasn't happened this year due to COVID-19. Even where only a handful of artists are given these opportunities, their experiences filter through their networks, and plays a large role is the emergence of new artists finding their way into gallery programmes.

As well as supporting artists and their peers, studios are central to the identity of their communities, especially those studios outside the city centre. In both 2016 and 2019, Alternator Studios in Birkenhead facilitated International Artist Micro-Residencies, titled, Translating the Street. Non-local artists with significant profiles were connected to the studio, and by extension, Oxton Road's small international businesses. The project supported Black and Asian artists, and created meaningful engagement with their local community in a way that would never have been possible in the project curated by an organisation outside the immediate neighbourhood. This is a significant example of how studios reach audiences who have never interacted with visual art in any form before.

What services are they used for?

As part of the Studio Network, we want to be able to help identify not just what studios are used for, but how new users can be invited in. Some studios have exceptional resources, but they are not made available to non-members. Some studios have no resources but are much more welcoming of external collaboration, and audiences, through their gallery spaces and external programmes.

Those with specific resources (woodwork, metalwork and ceramics in particular) attract artists working in those materials. This incubates collaboration and skills sharing. It increases the likelihood of studio members maintaining a long term relationship to the space.

How can our studios maximise their existing resources and help them to grow, attract new artists and strengthen the network and arts community?

The proposed actions of Artist Studio Network Merseyside are to build a resource map for the region, enabling potential space and resource swaps between artists, with potential associate membership for artists who can't afford access to dedicated studio space (Art in Liverpool C.I.C. benefited greatly from associate membership of ROAD Studios before AiL became formally constituted).

Funding and income

How do studios stay afloat?

Nearly all of the studios in the region are entirely reliant on rental income. Very few have ever accessed, or applied for, public funding. One studio we interviewed for a case study emphasised, with pride, they had never applied for Arts Council Funding. The reason for this, they say, is around the reactive nature of arts funding; either site specific or focused on a specific socio economic or societal community, if a studio does not fit into this category, it assumes it will be unsuccessful in securing the funding so does not apply.

This assumption is shared amongst many studios in the region, and sadly not entirely based in truth. The problem is in language and in access to information, with most funding streams open to studios, and funding advisers available for consultation to anybody who requires their advice free of charge. In short, funding guidance from almost all grant awarding bodies assumes a reasonable level of familiarity with the application process. This familiarity isn't shared by studio groups, most artist collectives, or many independent organisations - linked heavily to anxieties around what they as artists and producers are entitled to.

Two simple changes that can be made are 1) to clarify explicitly what it means, from all funders, to have received public funding in the past - whether that included being indirect beneficiaries (ie. receiving rent from an artist as part of public funding, or receiving a production commission as part of a publically funded programme). 2) to ensure that match funding is explicitly allowed when raised through rents or commission income to the studio as long as it covers costs associated with the grant application. These are both acceptable already, but implicit presentation of guidance means studios assume they aren't fundable before reaching the application stage.

There is also, anecdotally, a shift in how arts organisations and institutions engage with arts studios. They are rarely commissioned as studios, but instead individual artists are commissioned. The size of studios might be a factor in this, with space becoming a premium, it is harder to create a gallery space that showcases a studios work, therefore it is harder to position their expertise and experience so a commissioner does not know what they'd go to the studio "for".

Sales, geography and digital access

To understand what the situation is now, we need to understand what the traditional income streams for art studios have been.

Sales, the selling of art works created by artists based in and represented by the studio have formed an important part of income (how much?) in the past.

This has been aided by accessibility to gallery space, either within the studio itself or close by. This has helped to raise the profile of the work created within the studio, helping them to define an image and brand (what is the style/identity/brand of this studio, for example). Increasingly, studios are smaller and gallery space is less of a given. This is caused by several factors; space in Liverpool city centre is at a premium and many arts studios have moved to smaller spaces to maintain a semi central location. This removes the option of having a gallery. The trend in art being created shifts, a relatively small space can still exhibit paintings, sculpture or video work needs a larger space. Local arts buyers might be reluctant to buy this type of artwork.

The shift online is harder for studios. Creating an online shop requires time, energy and digital skills they might not possess in-house and cannot afford to buy in. How they display the art for sale digitally to make it look desirable can be a challenge. More importantly, managing physical space is enough for studio directors, the added responsibility of e-commerce is unsustainable and would simply open up the same barrage of problems facing arts org directors; attempting to be Finance Director, HR Director, Creative Director and Comms Directors all at once.

As artists move away from selling their work as an income stream and instead look to public commissions, the studio itself becomes less of a factor in handler/agent and instead becomes, primarily a place to create, store and network. This limits the income potential of the studio to rent instead of sales.

Crucially, all of this compounds the problem of sustainable space. Platform Studios in St Helens have an excellent working relationship with their local council, Make. CIC have become expert in securing long enough leases to plan ahead, Bridewell and Alternator Studios own their space outright, but these are amongst a handful of studios with the stability needed to progress (with both being old Victorian buildings, bringing their own challenges and costs of building up-keep, lack of heating, repairs and insurance). They are in a position to plan public programme, apply for funding and in some cases achieve charitable status, which further supports their security. Without these things, as is the case for most groups in Merseyside, studios have to move - this affects their identity, it affects their output, and it affects their ability to maintain stable relationships with artists; particularly when those moves are made to different parts of the region altogether.

Studio geography is worth a report in itself, but for now, the network needs the support and more importantly time, of local authorities to listen and plan alongside them to ensure studio practice isn't drive out of cultural centres.

What are income streams

Public funding isn't a standard fit for studios. Their work is far less about public programming than other arts organisations, but that shouldn't mean that they felt unable to apply for COVID support, or access rate relief.

Income is reliant on artists though, and as individuals they do access public funding, so there is some reliance on public funding for sustainability.

How sustainable do these income streams feel?

Not particularly, but there are ways to stabilise some income streams, or at least take the weight away from expenditure.

Public funding: The advice of this report isn't the suggestion of public funding as the route for all studios. Studios have always used rent as their main income stream, but for those working on public programme, better access to funding is essential, even if that is simply through more direct communication channels with funders, or greater efforts to ensure awareness of what grants are available.

Rent: Rent is reliant on artist income, so is partly out of the control of studios. This can be supported by studio though, by enabling members access to workshop or sales space (either in house, or through partnerships). 2020 has been extraordinarily challenging on this front as public programme has been near impossible, and digital workshops have happened, but rely on skills sets that not every artist has - it is worth making the point that teaching online is not the same as teaching in person, it is far harder to do, and far harder to benefit from.

Public Programme: As above, COVID-19 has wiped out this income stream for most studios, some have hosted outstanding digital programmes which have been incredibly well received by their audiences, and in some case have expanded that audience. For others sales have been wiped out where that was the main source of income - and not just studios, but independent galleries have had a year that can, at its most gentle, be described as turbulent. But the question here isn't about COVID impact, it's about sustainability, so one fundamental question that needs to be asked of all artists, studios, audiences and galleries is whether art is saleable any more? There are artists working in saleable art forms, and they have a successful trade, in some cases regular patrons, but creative practice has changed so dramatically since the turn of the millenium, with interdisciplinary art forms, film, performance and publication becoming more visible in contemporary galleries than painting, drawing or craft. This has shifted the identity of the arts away from sale rooms, and into galleries - a shift which has been beneficial in terms of social impact, and quality, but not for income (in other words, good for audiences, but not for artists).

Would income feel safer if there were set criteria for rates relief? What hoops need jumping through to achieve this (eg. demonstrable financial impact on local economy from studios and studio artists)?

Yes. But how do we get there? One of the key actions following this report is to address this possibility in collaboration with local authorities. Not only to make it a possibility, but to clarify what those hoops might actually be, and how social or financial impact can be assessed in the very particular case of artist studios.

Addressing artist sustainability:

If part of the sustainability problem is on artist retention, is it a wider question of ensuring a proportion of local authority arts funding is specifically assigned to local artists (and that this information is committed publically)? If artists have a stable income locally, or opportunities to access one - can that help studios?

For even the most stable of studios and organisations, the unpredictability of the wider market can have a knock on effect for their income. Dot-art has operated for 12 years and has a studio and exhibition structure. They support artists in the sale of their work

Dot-art was recently downsized within their building by their landlord who has recently informed them their building is now up for sale. As with the rest of the arts, the hope is that this will take time but it adds another layer of uncertainty. They will look for an alternative space, but have worked with this current landlord since 2010, so even long standing relationships do not always guarantee security.

This means that dot-art's secure model now feels less secure than it did. Rent for the arts studios within dot-art are set at an affordable level because they do not have to pay rent to the landlord. A change in premises and landlord could result in higher studio fees for tenants.

What would they like to secure?

For many studios, marketing is seen as key, but nearly always done in house through social media to organically retained audiences. Audience growth is slow, and audience loyalty is entirely dependent on experience.

It is worth noting that marketing is an issue across the whole of the independent arts sector. Marketing is a resource that many cannot afford externally. With a severe reduction in the amount of arts press, especially at a local level, artists, art studios and independent galleries frequently rely on their own networks to promote work and exhibitions. Being outside of tourism agencies, economy boards and NPO structures that define local and regional arts networking and collectives means that these independent networks struggle to reach and communicate with an audience outside of their own.

This inhibits the ability of the studios to reach new markets - they are encased in bubbles of their existing friends and contacts. This means that they stay stuck in a particular scene and group, making it hard for them to reach new artists and make new connections. Once their contact at a particular arts festival moves on, or the local authority, for example, they either let the contact dwindle or struggle to find the new individual.

Outside of funding, stable space as a move away from studios being a piece of urban development, and towards being part of the end result, is a widely held desire. This needs the support of specific local authorities, as well as the CA, ensuring small scale local culture is seen as key to the identity of new urban areas once they are established.

Closely linked to this is the desire of local Black artists to set up their own studios and local creative spaces. This desire needs to be nurtured in other groups, including Queer artists. Neither group is represented in leadership roles in studios around the region. By financially supporting the development of local studio models away from town/city centres, more diverse artists might move from idea to reality.

What do studios need?

- 1) Support. Support from the wider sector, support from funders, and support from their own network. This network was set up to advocate for that support, in the knowledge that it will not always be financial. Access to time and information is as valuable in many cases as finance. Access to marketing opportunities, and wider regional audiences is crucial to all studio groups, whether they have public programme or not. Access to business support services will have an invaluable impact on confidence as well as providing new skill sets.
- 2) Comfort. Not a gentle back rub, but the comfort and reassurance that comes with knowing they are in safe spaces, with adequate heating, water and security; to know that their space is theirs for long enough to plan ahead. Comfort might seem the wrong word, but we've written sustainability so many times that it feels important to be candid about what that sustainability provides. The reality is that studios are founded and managed as passion projects. They are personal to the people running them, as with many independent arts organisations, including Art in Liverpool. This means that their failures, and their successes, are felt ten fold by the artists leading them. They are the beating heart of our cultural sector, and deserve the reassurance of security in their home.
- 3) Money. Fundamentally, all studios need money to survive. This might be through grants, it might be through new self-generated income streams, but it might be simpler to achieve than that; long-term tenancy agreements with stable rents; rates reductions, or exemptions; access to free marketing resources. If some costs can be reduced as standard for studio groups it would improve their ability to save towards programme, artist support or building costs. We need to remember that they do have income streams, that's not the core problem. The core problem is that the spending is too close to outweighing the income.

Case Studies & artist survey: Appendix

Tony Knox, Road Studios

The current situation

One of the main issues is that a lot of funding is often tied into political and cultural needs such as funding for specific race/sexuality agendas for inclusion, or they are very site-specific to particular areas that might have a high unemployment social deprivation or high immigration into that designated area. The studio may be outside of the boundaries or does not fit into the categories. At Road Studios we do not any longer have a designated gallery space therefore that has limited options to apply for specific funding. Also, because we cannot tailor the projects towards that affected funding criteria we are often out of the loop and what tends to happen bodies of which have been funded before often get funded again and it becomes a circle of hierarchy.

Our studio output has changed over the past seven years. One of the key reasons for this is because a lot of buildings within Liverpool city centre and the outside regions have been brought up by property developers who would rather sit on a building rather than use it for temporary exhibitions or performances.

The property market

During the past 20years' experience of curating shows, I have noticed a considerable drop in opportunities to secure buildings and more of a lack of empathy with property development companies and estate agents that see art in the vacated property is more of a hindrance than an opportunity to bring to the foresight the location and practicalities being in usage.

We have been evicted from two locations, one which resulted in high court dates disputing eviction notices. This has strongly affected the sustainability of a studio space and the difficulties of working with a landlord. During that time period we briefly moved into George Henry Lees this was impractical as we had huge restrictions with flooding and access to the building. We ended up moving back to our original space for another four months until we were finally evicted, then we moved to Northern Lights. This was supposed to be a temporary location but we've been there for over a year and a half. We were given a temporary gallery this was not very practical because the space was taken away from us then given it back to us, then taken away again meaning we had to cancel a lot of shows. It made us consider how we could define our practice and showcase our brand without a designated gallery space to showcase some of our projects.

I feel with all these lessons it would be more practical if we owned a building and got a mortgage on it that way we could define the space how we saw fit. A site specific gallery and workspace would be more practical, instead of being in small and cramped spaces because of the high cost of rent.

In the “arts world”

In terms of public presence, Road Studios has often tried to integrate itself when there are certain events within Liverpool city centre such as the Liverpool Biennial and the Independents Biennial, also late-night and the Threshold Festival. By even doing these small events and placing it within a logical context we have often tried to raise our profile, making more opportunities for our members to help showcase them and give them a potential income.

Studios offer artists an infrastructure helping freelancers to create and engage with inspiring creative media and benefit from a network of support while also adding their voice to something bigger. This I suppose would be dictated by who is in charge of the studio and what their agenda is as well, often an artist is looking for a home where they can be a creative place with fellow minded artists, they can run through ideas, discuss grow and collaborate. One of the main advantages of having a studio space is the access to other creative minds and the possibilities of collaborations and working through ideas.

Accessibility and diversity

With our current studio, disability access is an issue, as it was in our last space. Our previous studio was on the top floor of a four storey building. Currently we are on the first floor with no lift to accessibility is limited.

24 hour openings would benefit accessibility as within the workforce people work different hours - the old 9-5 is becoming a thing of the past, so access to space is more important.

In terms of diversity we have always kept an open-door policy, regardless of sex, race or political views. Everyone is treated the same. In the past we have had members of mixed race, Asian descent, with mental health issues, transgender. Studios tend to be very transit as, because of the nature of art and the lack of infrastructure in the North of England, it's hard to make a living from art alone, so people come and go.

The geographical spread of studios

I have noticed far fewer studios in the past 20 years, there are fewer opportunities. Road Studios was originally based in Victoria Street in Liverpool City Centre, and is now in Baltic, more on the outskirts of the city centre. The rent increases with each financial year and this is one of the key issues. Property Development Companies are the middleman. They bring in

opportunities and there is a subsidy to a certain degree, but what happens when the lease runs out?

I feel a lot of creative industries would love a small desk space to be utilised so they can maximise on profile, while traditional practices would want a larger space to create pieces of art alongside gallery space. We've spoken about maybe moving to Wirral because it feels as though Liverpool is unsustainable - along with the increases in rent a lot of the buildings have been bought up and the price is astronomical.

Artists have often been used as a catalyst for regeneration. The Biennial is a classic example of that, where they are given the space and then property developers move in once they are finished. This model continues for 20 years and artists once based in the city centre have been systematically moved to the suburbs. There's a concept of 'luxury studio spaces' adopted by property developers looking to maximise profits.

What do you need?

We need a series of adverts so people can see the studio's achievements. Temporary window spaces in Liverpool city centre could allow us to develop projects and give artists, from different backgrounds, a temporary space to show their work, both on and offline.

We need to brand and specifically create an infrastructure that is going to be sustainable.

We need a Biennial festival that actively engages with the art studio community.

We need to be on the listings for opportunities.

Artist Survey Appendix

*Do you use an art studio? Yes

*If you do, what do you use the studio for? Making work, writing proposals, anything art related

*Does the rent seem reasonable to you? Yes

*What role do you feel studios play in the arts community? Studios are central, they connect artists and provide a reference point for those outside, and a point of contact

*What changes would you like to see among studios, and what impact do you think this might have on you as an artist? Studios need to be bigger, cheaper, and provide better facilities - darkroom, project spaces, workshops etc

(Margaret O'Brien TRS)

*Do you use an art studio?

Yes at The Bluecoat

*If you do, what do you use the studio for?

Illustration and Art projects.

*Does the rent seem reasonable to you?

Yes relatively. It has central heating, I couldn't do a studio that's not heated these days!

I've been in many studios from several in London, one in Brighton and now Liverpool, it would be great to connect Studios across the U.K with some sort of central hub. Studio access for practicing Artists and Designers should be part subsidised by local councils as a benefit for an area's growth and economy. Brighton studios benefit the local economy by having open studios twice a year. Things have changed because of the virus, but creative studios and outlets are really important to Artists, Illustrators and Designers ability to make a living.

Siobhan Harrison, Bluecoat

I don't have an art studio at the moment;

Why? Because I've found it difficult to identify a studio in or very close to Liverpool city centre with reasonable rent and also where there were openings that could be applied for by people without any connections with that studio.

I think artist studios are very important in the arts community: as ways of having contact with other artists, networking opportunities, and a potential for studio exhibitions.

Teresa Holmes

>> CASE STUDY: One September (Deborah Morgan):

The choice when we moved in to Metal. We went to the space that we were able to find and afford. We were really fortunate that, about three years ago, Metal

had spaces available in their office and we were very lucky. It's heavily subsidised there.

One September have developed loads since we've been there thanks to Metal's support. We're always project funded so we had very little income so our rent is basically paid from our own pockets, but when Aleasha and I first began One September, about five years we were in studios, The Cave on Victoria Street.

We loved it there, and as a studio it really worked for us because we were able to make a mess. We're primarily theatre practitioners, but we work with a lot of artists, and Aleasha's work at the moment involves wet clay, so having access to those kind of spaces is really useful for us.

We really enjoyed the diversity of different artists at The Cave. We could share resources, ideas, and learn from each other. We would have stayed, regardless of the fact it was freezing, but we had to get out when the building was being taken over and turned into a hotel.

Then we went to Hope Street Ltd. They moved and took over some empty space on Lord Street. (Peter Ward ran Theatre and education). They had some office space that we couldn't afford, but we offered our services in kind with fundraising and writing, but then they lost their Arts Council funding and closed the office, which was when we moved to Metal.

Of all the places, we've just wanted somewhere with an opportunity for us to work other than the desk – to be too desk bound is really frustrating, so to have space on site where you can go off and make a mess is ideal. We use the whole building at Metal. For the Humanise Project, Metal began by giving us support through their Time & Space residency, so Aleasha got space to develop humanise in the Welcome Room & Engine Room for public screenings and talks, and we've used the dance space upstairs for rehearsals and bringing people together for workshops. And we've also used the other studio because we were allowed to make a mess and experiment with clay and building.

We stumbled into Metal, but it worked out perfectly. We were a little bit concerned because we always wanted to be based in the city more for accessibility, because one of the important things for our work is meeting other people, so we wondered whether we'd be isolated at Edge Hill, but it worked out really well. They've been really good to us.

[>>> CASE STUDY: Freida Mckitrick \(Art Quarter\)](#)

Art Quarter isn't just Hub artists, but there are some artists from the studios here. It started with One Art in Liverpool One. They gave us an empty shop as part of a scheme they were running for local groups. They supported somebody selling asparagus for one, but we were working with ten artists from different parts of Merseyside. The idea was that you had to be from

Merseyside, and you planned and produced everything yourself. It was similar in a way to George Henry Lees (IB18) but more commercial, in that it brought artists together and highlighted local makers.

It was nothing to do with the studio as such, but some of the studio were involved, and it was a really good selling base in Liverpool ONE, but it was a really good selling space. People from cruise ships, people visiting the city, gallery goers, shoppers.

It was really successful, over the years they gave us three different shops. And then we were contacted by Albert Dock who gave use one shop. It wasn't as successful in selling there, but it was very kind of the Docks to give us that space. And now we're in the Met Quarter because they've got empty shops too.

They gave us it for free but we had to pay business rates. When it was split between twelve it was kind of affordable, and then we paid for the gas and electric, so when it was split it was ok. And then they started work on the Liverpool Music Academy upstairs, so they gave us wall space outside that on the 1st floor – nice wall space, all white wall. So the artists from Hub exhibited there, and they paid £100 between them for the month. Which topped up our shortfall. They sold work up there, but that's more like a gallery than the shop downstairs which is more commercial. We sold for them through the shop, which helped support the studio in a way.

We were due to exhibit another group, led by Maria from our studios, but then lockdown happened.

What Jenina, and Rachael (MetQuarter staff) say is that we're first out, because its pop-up, but we'd be moved to another unit, so we can safely be in MQ quite flexibly. But then the government stopped business rates this year, and we got the rates grants through lockdown. So it's worked extremely well thanks to the Met Quarter and Liverpool ONE's support.

And now, two people who started at the beginning with us in L1, have started their own shops, commercial businesses (Liverpool Gift Gallery in West Derby, and Nest in Albert Dock). So people have moved on, and they're doing their own thing but it's led to them being self-sustaining. But we're still a cooperative, or whatever we are - a group of friends and artists who support each other.

ArtQuarter doesn't make a living for us now. When we were in L1 it did work. A few people there had a very sustainable living from it, but not in MQ. Obviously not with COVID, but it depends where your gallery's placed and the price, and whether you're going commercial to attract visitors. I don't know how sustainable it would have been at GHL (IB18 group floor, along the riverrun) but it worked really well there for a while. A few Hub artists were in that show and they said it worked really well.

It'd be interesting to see whether a non-commercial space could come in to MQ and make a difference to our sales or footfall. The Music Academy has

opened upstairs now, and they're lovely but they're not going to come in and buy our work. The cinema makes a difference. We catch their visitors who buy gifts, usually only up to around £40. They might buy a card or a small print, but it pays for the space.

There must be some money in Arts Council or the councils for artist space, because there's money coming in for the arts and we don't know where it goes. Like look at GHL and the exhibition there with all the studios bringing work and artists in one space. It brought people in and it gave them space, but whether it's commercial or not, that's what should be happening, and it isn't happening. There needs to be a permanent space, like Bluecoat, but for local artists and studios to have something more permanent to show for themselves.

>>> CASE STUDY: Terry Duffy (on founding Arena Studios):

As you know I set up Arena in 1985, it was the first major multi-disciplinary studio in Liverpool and I think the North West. It had some 50 or more artists and designers working there. I directed it until 1992. It is still going, in a far smaller way in the Baltic. There was also the Bridewell which I help set up in the 70's as a student and LAW in Hope St set up by Pete Clarke.

Changes since then? Well in the 80's Liverpool was on its knees and Merseyside Arts was no help. However, the Department of Trade and Industry was a great help encouraging artists and designers to apply for funding for equipment, enterprise, etc.

As I haven't been involved in Liverpool studios for some time I can't really say except I did advise the founders of the Baltic on studios use, costs, etc.. Except for the obvious ones like Royal Standard. As you know since the 90's there has been a flood of them.

If you are simply talking about fine artists studios the problem is different to multi-disciplinary as fine artists in most cases cant afford the economic going rate. When asked, I keep advising studio directors that fine art studios need to be subsidised. Or artists themselves have to search out the cheapest manageable buildings, create groups, develop a vision, etc. Sustainability in fine art studios is difficult and one that continues to be problematic.

State of the Studios: Merseyside 2021

A report for the Artist Studio Network Merseyside, compiled by Laura Brown & Art in Liverpool C.I.C

With thanks to Artist Studio Network Merseyside, and all the studios who supported this report.

Contact: patrick@artinliverpool.com

Art in
Liverpool. +
com

