



NEUK

A summary of

Removing Barriers: A report on research into the experiences of neurodivergent artists in Scotland

For the audio version of this summary, please click [here](#)

For the full report (58 pages), and the Easy Read version, please click [here](#)

About the Project

This report is part of a Creative Scotland-funded project which includes the development of a manifesto for how neurodivergent¹ artists could be better supported in the Scottish arts scene. Neuk Collective, which was formed as part of this project, sought input from a wider range of neurodivergent artists through:

- An in-depth, text-based online survey;
- an Easy Read survey;
- and two online discussion events.

These aimed to find out their experiences in the arts, particularly the barriers they experience, their priorities for change, and what kind of interventions they thought would be most helpful.

For the purposes of the research, we asked that participants were artists living/working in Scotland, aged over 18, and self-identified as neurodivergent.

¹ We kept the definition of neurodivergence broad, including but not limited to ADD/ADHD, autism/aspergers, bipolar, chronic anxiety or depression, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyslexia, dyspraxia, epilepsy, OCD, PTSD or Tourettes.

Participants were recruited via a social media campaign (twitter, Instagram, and facebook groups aimed at neurodivergent people), and by an email recruitment campaign to organisations that represent neurodivergent people, or specific groups that were underrepresented in the initial applications for Neuk Collective (rural and BAME artists).

Who filled out the surveys?

43 artists completed the in-depth survey, which is the only survey that asked demographic monitoring questions. This is because it was felt that a shorter questionnaire would encourage more participation in the Easy Read survey.

Particular efforts were made to reach out to BAME artists, as BAME experiences are often underrepresented in neurodivergent spaces. The proportion of BAME respondents (9%) was slightly higher than the proportion of the Scottish population as a whole (4%), suggesting prioritising BAME organisations and artists when publicising the survey had some success. The number of rural respondents (7, or 16%) was roughly in line with the national figures (17%).²

Interestingly, the number of respondents who had other disabilities in addition to being neurodivergent was very high - only 7% of respondents did not have another disability or chronic health condition. The most common co-morbid disability was a mental health condition (26, 60%), followed by other long term/chronic condition (15, 35%), and then cognitive or learning disabilities (8, 19%)

What did we learn?

The 43 responses to the in-depth survey indicated that

- Neurodivergent artists face a lot of **additional barriers** to working in the arts;
- **Financial insecurity** (33, 77%), **social difficulties** (33, 77%) and, in particular, difficulties with the **administrative tasks** associated with a career in the arts (36, 84%) were considered the most important barriers;
- However **difficulties accessing funding, negative attitudes, communication gaps** and barriers, lack of access to **peer support**, lack of access to **quiet**

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/rural-scotland-key-facts-2018/pages/2>

spaces/rest breaks, and **unfeasible workloads/pace of work** were all also considered significant barriers (50%+);

- Many neurodivergent artists are very worried about making and selling work, or receiving funding to make work **while on disability benefits** and feel trapped by the inflexibility of the benefits system, and most supported **lobbying on this issue** (42, 98%);
- Many artists reported that they are frustrated at being classed as ‘disabled artists’ and felt that **‘disability art’ is siloed and treated with less respect** than mainstream art.

The survey also showed that neurodivergent artists believe there are concrete, short- to medium-term improvements that would make the arts more accessible for neurodivergent people. All the possibilities suggested in the survey received high levels of support (79%+), but those considered most important were:

- **Administrative assistance/advice** and support with writing applications (39, 91%);
- **Access to quiet spaces and rest breaks** (40, 93%);
- Tailored **mentoring schemes** that support neurodivergent artists (39, 91%);
- Tailored **opportunities and funding streams** that specifically support neurodivergent artists (31, 91%).

Longer term, artists also expressed strong support for lobbying for funding bodies to **incentivise improvements in accessibility** by attaching funding conditions to grants (37, 86%).

Our research also showed a clear mandate for the establishment of a **professional network** for neurodivergent artists to meet, collaborate and self-advocate (40, 93%).

The **Easy Read survey** had 7 respondents, which was too small for statistical analyses, but there were four things that the majority of participants wanted:

- Having an **easier way to explain my needs** to people I'm working with (6 out of 7);
- **Opportunities** especially for neurodivergent people **to learn and make art with other artists** (6 out of 7);
- Having **ways to meet other neurodivergent artists**, such as events or meet-ups (6 out of 7);
- **Seeing more neurodivergent artists being successful** in the art scene (7 out of 7).

The two discussion events added nuance to what we learned in the online surveys and suggested that artists want opportunities that lead to genuine **long-term career development** and feel that at present, many opportunities for disabled artists don't offer that. Participants also expressed the desire for **long-term organisational, cultural and policy change** that would **improve accessibility for all artists**, not just neurodivergent ones.

Conclusions and Recommendations

These conclusions and recommendations are based on the results of the surveys and events, and will feed into our manifesto, which is due out in autumn 2021.

I. **Recognise that neurodivergent artists are significantly disadvantaged**

The creative industries are notoriously difficult to break into and making a living within them can be a struggle for any artist. However **neurodivergent artists face significant additional barriers** to entering and working within the creative industries, often making an already-difficult situation impossible and keeping neurodivergent people out of the arts.

2. Consider neurodivergent artists intersectionally

Our research also highlighted the **need to see neurodivergent artists holistically** and remember their neurodivergence may intersect with other protected or marginalised identities/characteristics, e.g. age, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, caring responsibilities or rurality. In particular, neurodivergent people are very likely to have other disabilities and this complexity needs to be born in mind when creating opportunities or supportive workplaces.

3. Neurodivergent artists need a broad range of support and opportunities

The survey suggested 11 ways in which neurodivergent artists might be helped in the short- to medium-term, from administrative support to tailored opportunities for neurodivergent artists. Respondents scored all of these highly, showing there is a **clear need for concrete improvements to working conditions; support for artists** to navigate the impenetrable social and administrative systems that govern the art world; and **more high-quality opportunities** made with the needs and long-term career development of neurodivergent artists in mind. Any manifesto needs to make the case for all these things.

4. Treat benefits reform as a priority

Our research has also shown, however, that neurodivergent people also want **long-term, systemic changes** to level the playing field. They want the **benefits system to be reformed** so that disabled people are not forced to choose between working for free or not at all. They want to be able to establish an enriching creative practice, that fits within their energy and neurological limits, without fear of being declared 'fit for work' as a result. And they want arts and disability organisations to take this issue seriously as a priority.

5. Neurodivergent artists need peer support

There is also a clear mandate for the **establishment of a professional network** to advocate for and support neurodivergent artists long- term.

6. **Neurodivergent artists are mainstream artists**

Our research also shows that **neurodivergent artists want to be respected and seen as ‘mainstream’ rather than “disability” artists**, and that opportunities need to be created with this in mind. There is a tendency for art made by disabled people to be automatically classed as either “therapeutic” or “outsider” and both survey respondents and discussion participants felt patronised by these approaches. Like any other artists, neurodivergent artists should be able to create work that issues from their experience without being pathologized, and conversely, not be required to “perform” their neurodiversity because that is the only type of work organisations want to see from them.

7. **Good practice must not be confined to a few specialist organisations**

The artists we heard from also agreed that **all arts organisations need to think about accessibility** as opposed to just a few specialist disability arts organisations, and supported the use of funding conditions to ensure this happens. This may require reform of the way the arts are funded, but it would go a long way to integrating neurodivergent artists into the wider art world and breaking down the wall between “disability” and “mainstream” arts.

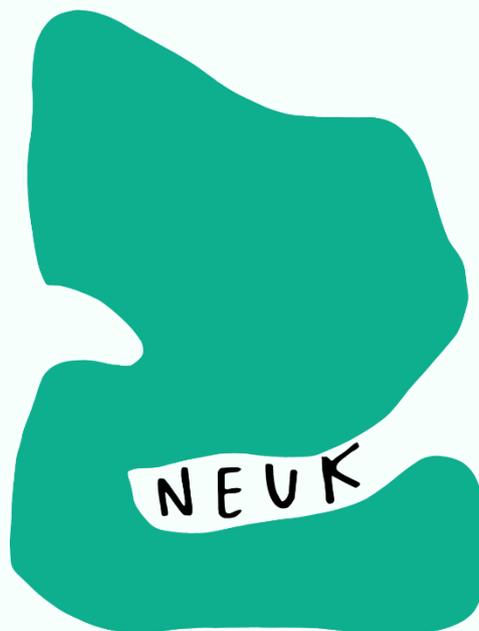
8. **The broader culture of the arts needs to change**

Finally, artists want **broader cultural change** that would make the arts a more welcoming place for disabled and non-disabled artists alike. More flexible working, more funding, less reliance on an abundance of young cheap labour, better communication, better planning and organisation, and sensitivity to individual situations and needs would ultimately make the arts more accessible for everyone.

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