

## Case study:

# Lifting Incomes for Performing Artists

## Executive summary

Performing artists in Aotearoa New Zealand face severe financial challenges, earning an average of just \$17,000 annually from their creative work. This precarious situation forces many to seek employment outside their field, compromising their artistic development and the quality of work produced. Despite research demonstrating the significant economic contribution of the performing arts sector (generating 60,500 FTE jobs) and its positive impact on community wellbeing, artists continue to be undervalued and underpaid.

Toi Mai tested these assumptions via a wānanga with a cross section of agencies. A consensus emerged on the sector's problems that includes the following:

- 1. Cultural literacy gap** – the lack of arts education and cultural literacy in schools has produced generations who don't understand or value the contribution of arts and creativity to society.
- 2. Systemic devaluation** – successive governments' scepticism about the value of the arts despite evidence has resulted in inconsistent policy approaches and limited investment.
- 3. Unsustainable funding models** – short-term funding prevents artists and companies from planning, growing or developing quality work over time.
- 4. Gig economy vulnerability** – the project-to-project nature of performing arts work creates irregular income streams with unpaid periods between contracts.
- 5. Infrastructure imbalance** – heavy investment in expensive "hard infrastructure" (venues) without corresponding investment in "soft infrastructure" (programming, promotion, management) leaves venues underutilised and inaccessible.
- 6. Siloed approach** – local and central government agencies work in isolation without coordination, duplicating efforts and missing opportunities for resource-sharing and aligned investment.
- 7. Inadequate advocacy** – limited peak bodies or unions to represent the sector's interests to the Government.

Developing an integrated strategy to address these root causes could significantly improve performing artists' incomes. We recommend the following:

- 1. Embed cultural literacy in education** – integrate arts and creativity throughout the school curriculum, leveraging the current curriculum review to build a foundation of cultural appreciation and understanding from an early age.
- 2. Develop a connected arts network** – establish a national network of community-led regional arts organisations modelled after successful examples like Creative Waikato, supported by forums for central and local government collaboration.
- 3. Balance infrastructure investment** – ensure funding for “soft infrastructure” matches investment in physical venues, creating an ecosystem where expensive facilities can be fully utilised.
- 4. Create social safety nets** – implement targeted support such as social funding, tax smoothing or other financial mechanisms specifically designed for gig economy workers.
- 5. Reform and expand funding models** – move beyond short-term grants to longer-term, generative funding approaches that enable planning and growth.
- 6. Align education with industry needs** – develop training programmes in partnership with the sector that provide graduates with diverse career pathways and transferable skills beyond “peak performance” roles.
- 7. Strengthen sector advocacy** – support the development of peak bodies and unions that can effectively represent performing artists’ interests in policy discussions.

Lifting incomes for performing artists requires cross-government coordination and a fundamental shift in how arts and creativity are valued in New Zealand society. The *Amplify* strategy and arts curriculum review provide timely opportunities to embed these changes for long-term impact on artists’ incomes and the sustainability of the performing arts sector.



Photo by Andi Crown from Movement of the Human - Tōrua