

Lifting incomes for performing artists: Case study of an enquiry



Cross-agency wānanga

Following from the recommendations of *Kia Mura! Performing Arts Workforce Development Plan*, Toi Mai convened a cross-agency wānanga at Te Tari Take Inland Revenue in November 2024. The purpose was to explore how government policy and other levers could be employed to lift incomes for performing artists in Aotearoa.

The wānanga brought together kaimahi from across the public and creative sectors, including Manatū Taonga, Creative New Zealand, Ministry for Pacific Peoples, Whaikaha – Ministry for Disabled People, Tāwhiri Wellington Festival of the Arts, Creative Waikato, Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi and WeCreate.

Prior to the meeting, Toi Mai supplied an infographic to the participants with insights from the performing arts sector engagements (see Horizon 1: The Status Quo, Appendix A). Using the Three Horizons Framework (a systems thinking tool), participants tested these insights and assumptions, and identified challenges and possible policy levers. Their thoughts are provided as quotes throughout the text. This document presents the main themes of this enquiry and weaves together insights gathered from the broader industry context in which Toi Mai operates.



Context

The wānanga was initiated as a response to the problems of the performing arts workforce. Kia Mura! highlighted the precarious nature of incomes in the sector – which are real, persistent and systemic. Sector feedback on the plan advocated for Toi Mai to pursue Recommendation 2: Investigate policy levers to boost incomes for practitioners by 2035.

Alongside this work, Toi Mai explored assumptions about the role of ticket sales in artists' incomes. We assumed that selling higher numbers of tickets at increased prices would lead to better pay for artists. However, research showed that not only was this not the case – because budgets

including artists' pay rates were set before tickets went on sale – but for producers of dance or theatre productions, providing affordable tickets was also a way of making shows accessible to wider audiences.

In contrast, musicians may sometimes benefit from door sales depending on the type of venue, but sales are increasingly managed by digital platforms limiting access to direct income.

In short, increased ticket sales have no impact on most artists' earnings. This underlined the need to explore broader structural solutions.



Challenges facing the performing arts workforce

The wānanga confirmed that low incomes in the performing arts sector are symptoms of deeper systemic issues. At the heart of these is a persistent problem: value perception.

Compared to industries like agriculture or manufacturing, the arts and creative sectors are undervalued. Despite their proven contributions to community wellbeing, cultural identity and the economy, the arts are frequently overlooked in public policy and funding decisions.

When the arts are not seen as essential, the people who create them are also not recognised or fairly compensated. This undervaluing was a central theme of the wānanga.

Participants identified several interconnected challenges, including:

- funding models
- lack of sustainable employment pathways
- inconsistent recognition of artists' work as skilled work
- limited integration of cultural policy with economic planning.

The wānanga highlighted potential responses, including:

- cross-agency policy alignment to support fair pay
- investment in long-term employment models
- arts and creativity skills taught throughout schooling
- inclusive practices to ensure equity of access to infrastructure
- narrative change to shift public and political perceptions of the arts
- arts advocacy groups to lobby government.

1. The value perception gap

2. System barriers

3. Opportunities for change

Below is a table summarising the challenges, benefits and responses together with some ideas to improve things provided by participants. This is expanded in the sections that follow. For a full list of topics discussed, see Appendix B.

Workforce problems and possible responses

Problem	Benefit of solving	Response	Suggested ideas
1. Lack of cultural literacy is undermining how performing arts are valued in Aotearoa. No consistent approach to cultural literacy in schools across Aotearoa.	Cultural literacy promotes understanding and valuing of the arts and creativity, and these “skills” can provide an uplift for education in general.	The arts are taught in schools so that cultural literacy and creativity are embedded as normative.	Ministry of Education explores ways to embed cultural literacy and creativity in schools.
2. Siloed local and national government agencies work towards their own outcomes with no systemic ways to co-ordinate, cost-share or make joint decisions.	An integrated and co-ordinated system contributes to national and regional economic development.	A systemic local/central government response to co-manage the central/local government interface for role clarity, cost-sharing and decision making.	Destination management plans are now required for local government to manage tourism. This requirement signals that investment in the arts and events is a strategic priority. Does this provide the opportunity for a formal network across the motu?
3. New high-spec venues are under-utilised because they are too expensive for community and sector use.	Showcase venues are in continuous use and contribute to economic development.	Recognition that the performing arts require a “stage” or “platform”. This necessitates a diverse but interconnected ecosystem of soft and hard infrastructure.	Soft infrastructure funded commensurate to hard infrastructure.

Problem	Benefit of solving	Response	Suggested ideas
4. The precariousness of work in the gig economy coupled with short-term funding models mean that artists live on the poverty line and that companies are unable to develop and plan for succession.	A thriving ecosystem for the performing arts in which nationally and internationally acclaimed work is continually presented.	A safety net for performing artists and employment in arts-adjacent roles.	Tax breaks or tax considerations such as tax smoothing for performing artists.
			Social investment that funds and employs performing artists.
5. Funding models limit opportunities for artists and companies to plan and grow, and quality of work is compromised.	A regenerative sector that isn't reliant on funding.	A range of funding approaches like micro-loans, use of the tourism levy and reallocation of investment already in the system for better outcomes.	Expanded funding approaches by government agencies.
			Consideration for alternative funding models like the Irish artist lottery scheme .
6. Education model incentivises providers to offer training that does NOT translate into a confident entrepreneurial workforce.	Artists trained in awareness of their transferable skills and how to develop community, professional and business opportunities.	Education business model that works with industry to understand the sector and train an appropriate number of graduates.	Qualifications that include entrepreneurial skills and a range of opportunities and roles outside of peak performance.
			Understanding of transferable skills.
7. No peak body or union representation in the sector.	Performing arts has organisations to advocate to government for better conditions and be part of investment conversations.	Arts disciplines with the help of government develop advocacy organisations.	The establishment of arts advocacy bodies



Photo by Helen Oakes for Jolt Dance

1. Cultural literacy in Aotearoa

“We are not educating the imaginations we need for our future. The ability to imagine our future is limited by the [current] scarcity environment.”

Wānanga participants highlighted a problem with cultural literacy in Aotearoa, which has repercussions for the way that arts and creativity are perceived.

“Meaningful, active arts-led education [is needed] at primary, secondary and tertiary schools.”

“Education legitimises things. So, education needs to increase cultural literacy to provide the understanding of the value of art and its contribution to the whole of society ... This would have an impact on employability in all sectors as arts teaches you how to think creatively and critically etc.”

There is a credible argument that creativity is a foundational aspect of learning² and that without development, learners cannot build their understanding of art and creativity or their creative skills. This restricts generations of learners from realising the potential offered by understanding the arts and creative processes – and this loss of potential has impact on cross-disciplinary pollination and innovation across the wider workforce.

As Jeremy Mayall from Creative Waikato writes: “Ensuring that there is a pathway for engaging in creativity at all stages of our learning journeys is vital for shaping a society that can utilise imagination and communication to navigate uncertain times.”³

¹ Definition of cultural literacy <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Create%20ED%20Hirsch%20Cultural%20literacy.pdf>

² https://creativewaikato.co.nz/site/uploads/Creativity-in-Education-Handbook_Screen_Aug24.pdf

³ <https://creativewaikato.co.nz/news/exploring-artistic-creativity-for-future-employment-success>



Photo by Andi Crown from Movement of the Human - Tōrua

Participants provided the following insights:

- The arts exist in schools despite the system rather than being enabled by it.
- Teachers are taught in a system that devalues creativity and those teaching it feel disempowered.
- Creativity and creative processes had been removed from primary and secondary curriculums. An example cited was the lack of project-based learning.
- A close-minded attitude in the Ministry of Education and schools is hampering an ability to change this.

Participants described their ambition and vision for Aotearoa to be a country with high cultural literacy. To deliver this outcome, it is recommended that the Government make an intentional, active intervention to shape the future.

“How do we fit culture and wellbeing into the language of social and economic policy? Cultural literacy is not a dollar-for-dollar transaction – we need a non-partisan approach that is for the ‘common good’ not linked to a political agenda.”

⁴ <https://www.massey.ac.nz/about/news/research-shows-173bn-of-benefits-contributed-by-the-live-performance-sector-in-aotearoa-new-zealand/>

Impact on value

“How do you create new social norms as cultural pillars? People come to New Zealand for cultural experiences. What do we culturally value and amplify in the arts?”

Participants provided the following insights:

- The devaluing of arts and arts practitioners has a major impact on the workforce in terms of the way that the community perceives the arts, the way artists perceive themselves and the work made.
- The role of the arts is not recognised as a conduit for mental health support, or as a way of everyone having meaningful and beneficial activity.

Mindset shift

“What can happen when you can have an all-of-government response?”

“More visibility and value for government and local government agencies working with the arts. If they promoted the arts as a creative and cultural pillar, they could also advocate for funds to be redirected, e.g. hypothecation of the tourism dollar [into arts funding].”

Participants identified a sceptical mindset in government about the arts and creativity. This presents as:

- an unwillingness to acknowledge the economic and social contribution of the arts despite the evidence⁴
- continuing to ignore the long-standing problems for artists and the sector
- an absence of leadership or investment to address the problems.

The latter is not a new problem but one that suffers from political salience. One government introduces a solution, the next one discontinues it – but the problem remains.



2. Siloed agencies⁵

“We need more communication around infrastructure between central and local government. Cutting costs where costs don’t need to be helps artists. And more joined up approaches. Unblocking system’s blockages to bolster incomes.”

Central and local government agencies around the country work towards their own outcomes with no systemic ways to come together to share insights, partner, align investment or share resources. Whereas a network of agencies could contribute to national

and regional economic development. For example, the government now requires local councils to have destination management plans to promote and manage national and international tourism. Could this requirement provide a platform to develop a national network with co-ordinated resource sharing, decision making and collaboration? Sport NZ offers a model for this that includes professional and community sporting events that are part of regional and metropolitan tourist attractions.



Photo supplied by NZIF



Photo by Ralph Brown, Te Tangi a te Tūi - Te Rēhia Theatre & The Dust Palace at Te Pou Theatre

⁵ Definition: The people on stage and back stage that make the performances – the actors, performers, directors, dancers, musicians, technicians, designers, producers, managers, programmers – as well as the people that support the work to happen – marketing, communications, ticketing, accounting, finance, educators and educational institutions, capability builders, arts boards, regional arts organisations, funders and investors, local and central government officials and champions of arts and culture (in no particular order).



Photo by cottonbrostudios from Pexels

3. Intentionally developing hard and soft infrastructure

“Local authorities run public venues, and they need to make a profit. Local government has the hard infrastructure.”

Hard infrastructure was raised as an issue.

Insights included the following:

- Venues aren’t in continuous use, because they are too expensive for many live events and arts organisations to use.
- On the other hand, companies that own or lease their own buildings find this onerous and expensive.

It was agreed that landmark venues in continuous use can contribute to economic development by attracting tourism, which creates a ripple effect to the hospitality, transport and retail sectors – as well as providing pathways from training to jobs.

In the UK, theatre funding takes a broad approach across the theatre sector – from productions to building management and heritage upgrades, to grants for actors and companies and scholarships for training.⁶ This type of investment considers the whole ecosystem of the theatre sector.

⁶ For more information see <https://20bedfordway.com/news/theatre-funding-guide/>

4. Artists in the gig economy⁷

Performing artists work from project to project and contract to contract in a gig economy. This creates multiple difficulties, the most significant being inconsistent and irregular work with unpaid periods in between. See [Kia Mura! the Toi Puaki workforce development plan](#) for more detail.

Social investment is required to ensure the sector continues to produce high quality work and most importantly so that this workforce can live above the poverty line. Creative NZ research shows that most performing artists earn \$17,000 from their creative work and are forced to work outside the sector.

The Pathway to Arts and Cultural Employment (PACE) scheme was introduced in the 1990s to address this problem, but as mentioned above, one government tries to solve the problem with an initiative and the next discontinues the initiative. PACE has gone away but the problems haven't.

Research by Te Taumata Toi-a-Iwi suggests that tax breaks or tax considerations such as tax smoothing could also be a mechanism that would provide performing artists with financial support.



Photo by Andi Crown from Movement of the Human - Tōrua

5. Smarter approaches to funding

Creative NZ have changed their funding approach to support artists' time rather than funding projects. This means some applicants are able to gain funding beyond a year. Wānanga participants advocated for a broader rethink of funding approaches. This could, for example, be the ability for artists to access micro-loans or a portion of the tourism levy.

⁷ Gig economy refers to a broad range of self-employment, including freelance and contract work.



6. Numbers

Wānanga participants expressed concerns about how many performing artists could realistically be supported by the sector. Are we training too many people for roles and opportunities that don't exist? This question highlights the current training model where funding incentivises education providers to offer programmes without advice from industry about the actual workforce needs or size.

Numbers of graduates train in peak performance methods (such as starring roles) with expectations that aren't going to be met by opportunities in Aotearoa – and experience this as failure. Guided by industry, providers could ideally train a certain number of graduates for the workforce and provide experiences and opportunities outside of the peak performance model.

7. Peak bodies

There are currently few peak bodies or unions that represent the performing arts sector. E Tū covers the New Zealand Symphony musicians and Royal New Zealand Ballet dancers. Equity NZ represents actors, and Entertainment Technology NZ advocates for event and production technicians. Attempts have been made to establish an advocacy body for musicians, but to date this has been unsuccessful. The live events sector needs at least one cross-sector body to lobby government for what it needs.



Photo by Ben Fagan for Motif Poetry, from the Wellington Slam Champs 2022

What does this tell us?

“We are responding to ad hoc historical systems.”

Our enquiry began with a question about the levers and instruments of government that can work together to lift artists’ incomes. However, we found that a broader range of systemic issues are impacting the sector and require a conscious decision by Government to change. Most important is the need for the Government to decide that art and creativity are important for our economy and critical to the health and welfare of our communities.

With this decision, arts education and creative skills can be embedded into school curricula across age groups. Realistically, the impact of this has a 30-year trajectory, but the outcome means a future workforce with creative skills such as research, story-telling, communication, critical thinking and problem-solving that can be applied across multiple sectors for innovation and smarter ways of working.

Massey University research highlighted the significant contribution that the performing arts make to the economy with 60,500 FTE

jobs directly created by the sector together with increases to wellbeing measurements.⁹ Yet this contribution isn’t widely acknowledged or mentioned by the Government. Recent research commissioned by Toi Mai has quantified this as a \$12.9 billion contribution to the economy in 2022, or 4% of the total GDP.⁹

The Government’s national arts strategy, *Amplify: A Creative and Cultural Strategy for New Zealand*, provides direction for a number of workforces in the arts and cultural sector. To lift incomes in the performing arts sector, the Government also needs to activate its levers. And the sector needs to find champions and establish ways to effectively lobby government for its needs.

Recommended next steps

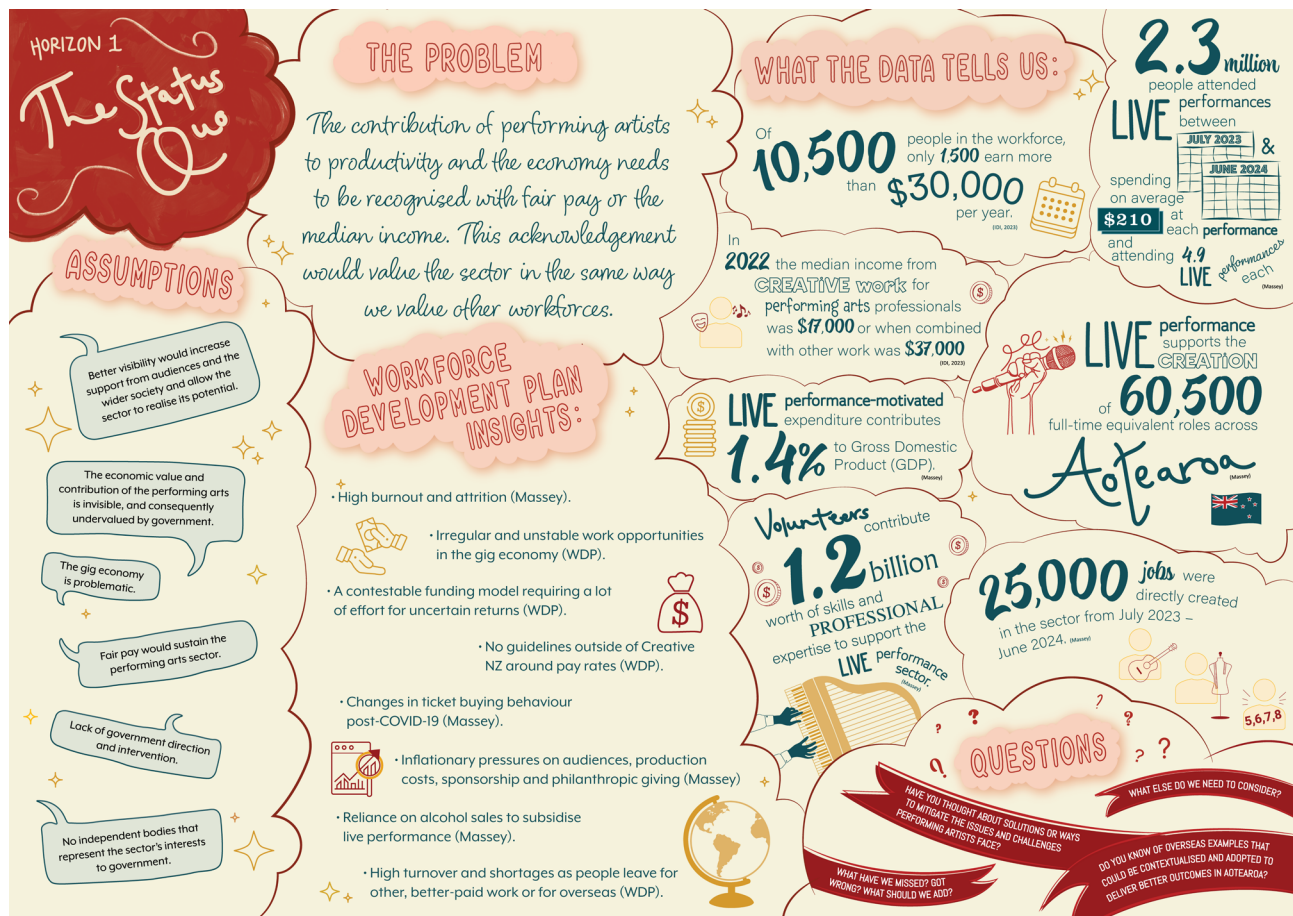
- New Service Industry Skills Board to pick up the work of advocacy for the sector.
- Sector organisations to use Toi Mai [data](#) and [insights](#) on the economic contribution and productivity of the arts sector to advocate to government for greater support.

⁸ See <https://www.massey.ac.nz/about/colleges-schools-and-institutes/college-of-creative-arts/college-of-creative-arts-research/measuring-and-articulating-the-value-of-live-performance-in-aotearoa/>

⁹ See Equab & Equab’s Skills in the Creative Sector commissioned by Toi Mai, <https://toimai.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Skills-in-the-creative-sector-report.pdf>



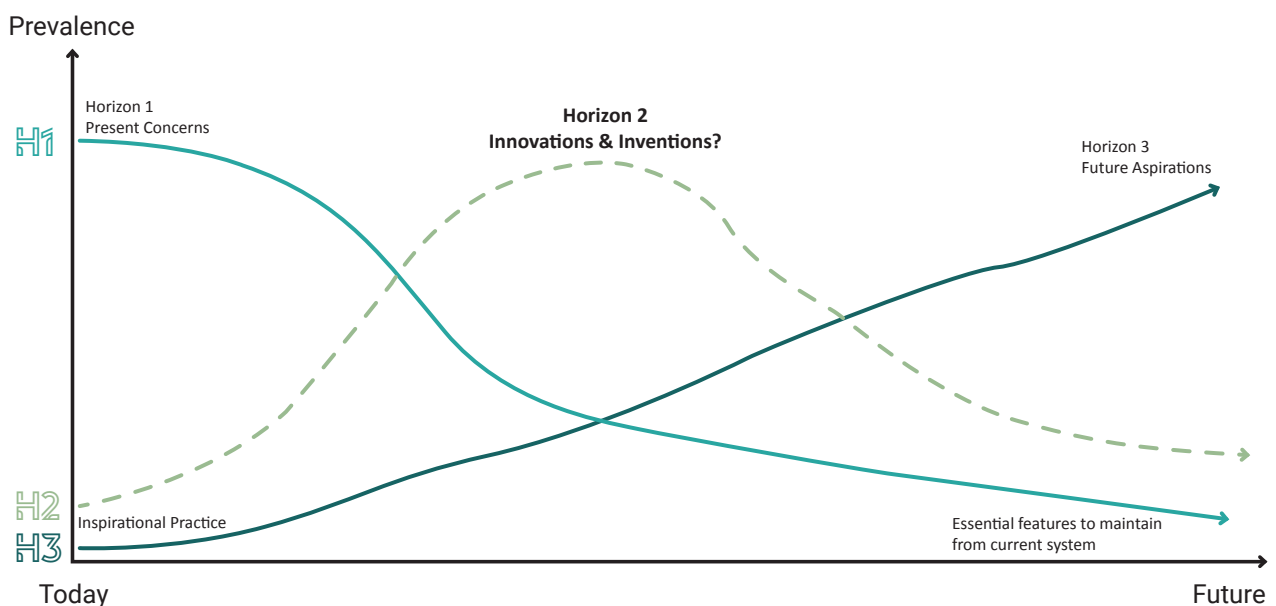
Appendix A



Innovation & Invention



What innovations or inventions (Horizon 2) are needed to transition to a future aspired state (Horizon 3)? Which are more critical??



Appendix B

Full list of discussion topics

Tax

- There are no existing tax or other options for artists earning under a living wage salary.
- Can tax rebates for artists be considered?
- How can the tax system be changed to recognise complexity?

Community benefits

- The role of arts as conducive to mental health support and everyone having activity.

Visibility

- Lack of arts visibility in the media.
- Arts not adequately covered in mainstream media.

Capability building

- Business skills, IP, tax, websites.
- Foundational cross-sector programmes at tertiary level (creativity, comms, voice, storytelling).
- Change at CNZ to open the doors to Māori, Pacific, and Toa disability organisations.
- Imagination gap.

Value

- Can arts be valued for its broad contribution to society?
- Lack of advocacy/peak bodies compared to other sectors.
- Recognition and value of creative work/performing arts as work.
- Lack of big commercial levers in the performing arts sector.

Other

- UBI as a human right.
- Deduction from salaries like KiwiSaver except “Invest in the arts” tax.
- Societal redesign away from current stress pandemic.
- Education leaders have no mandate for change.

