

SPOTLIGHTS AND SHADOWS



**MAPPING THE
PEOPLE AND
PRESSURES
OF STAGE
AND SCREEN**

**ACTORS'
TRUST**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the many people who have contributed to the success of this project, most importantly all the actors and stage management professionals who took part.

We are grateful to organisations that helped with the design of the survey during the scoping phase, assisted in sharing industry numbers, donated incentives and/or promoted and distributed the survey by contacting their members. These organisations included CIISA, Equity, Stage Management Association and The Stage. We are particularly indebted to Spotlight for their efforts in promoting the survey directly with their members, using unique survey links.

Delivered with the support of:

CIISA: CIISA is the industry-backed independent standards authority for the creative sector. Our purpose is to uphold consistent standards of behaviour across the creative industries



Equity: Equity is the performing arts and entertainment trade union, pushing for better pay, terms and conditions for performers and creative practitioners



Spotlight: Since 1927, Spotlight has been the gold standard for connecting talented actors with top agents and world-class casting directors across stage and screen

SPOTLIGHT

Stage Management Association:

SMA advocate for and support stage management in all aspects of live events and theatre work. We work to maintain high standards, and decent terms and conditions for all stage management



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FOREWORD

Like all actors, when we get the opportunity to go to work, it is a feeling like nothing else. It promises a day connected to like-minded people who want to create characters and stories which ultimately remind us, as audiences, that we are not alone in our fears, desires or mistakes.

The UK acting industry is vital because it preserves a rich cultural heritage that's recognised and admired around the world, from Shakespeare to cutting-edge contemporary theatre, film and TV. It fuels creativity and innovation, shaping how stories are told and how society reflects on itself. It is also a major economic driver – supporting jobs, tourism and local communities – while also playing a powerful role in education, wellbeing and social connection.

Yet this new research commissioned by Actors' Trust shows us – clearly and uncomfortably – that behind the wonder of creative expression and

storytelling sits a far less glamorous reality for many working in our industry. **Financial insecurity, mental health challenges and profound loneliness are widespread experiences that shape careers and lives.** The joy we create for audiences too often comes at a personal cost that remains unseen.

The industry itself has changed rapidly in recent years, and our research captures the impact of that shift. For example, the rise of self-tape auditions has brought flexibility and access for some, but can also be very demoralising, with a lack of feedback and in-person meetings contributing to feelings of self-doubt

and loneliness. Layered onto an already precarious freelance landscape, recent changes have increased uncertainty and reduced the informal peer support that was so vital.

Actors' Trust exists because no one should have to face these challenges alone. We have been supporting actors and stage management for over 140 years, and in recent years have been expanding our support to ensure we are relevant to today's industry and challenges. We have already expanded our grants programme, and this research will guide the next phase of our work. **As an immediate response to this report we are proud to launch a new mental health service specifically for those in the performing arts,** delivered by those who understand its unique challenges. We are also rolling out peer support to tackle the loneliness crisis that exists, and we will use this research as our evidence base as we continue to develop and evolve.

This report is a call to action for everyone who benefits from the performing arts: producers, broadcasters, platforms, funders, policymakers and audiences alike. If we want a vibrant, resilient performing arts sector, that continues to produce some of the greatest stories and experiences for our society, we must take action to ensure we look after our own. We are calling on others to join with us in the months and years ahead as we respond to the findings in this research, both in the way that we provide charitable support as well as in making structural changes within the industry. Together, we can ensure that the wonder of our industry is matched by dignity, security, wellbeing and connection for those who make it possible.

Alex Macqueen
Actor and Chair of Actors' Trust



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



From Shakespeare to James Bond and Bridget Jones, the UK's performing arts have had huge economic and cultural impact around the world. UK actors and stage management contribute enormously to this success, and they are passionate about their roles in the creative industries.

The reality for many actors and stage management is one of financial insecurity, poor mental wellbeing and a loneliness epidemic. Actors' Trust has commissioned new research which provides, for the first time, a comprehensive picture of the UK's acting and stage management community, including those working (and looking for work) on stage and screen.

This new research reveals a large, diverse workforce facing widespread and persistent challenges, many of which are **not adequately addressed by existing support structures**. It shows that this is a profession with real need.

MEDIAN GROSS ANNUAL INCOME

from all sources:

£17,000

current actors

£25,000

current stage management

£37,430

full-time employees in the UK

Around three quarters of actors (78%) and stage management (74%) experienced problems with their mental health in the last three years. In comparison, 20% of UK adults report having ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition.

Over three quarters (77%) of actors and over eight in ten (85%) stage management had a problem with loneliness in the last 12 months (GB adult population comparison: 25%).



Supporting the acting and stage management profession

For nearly 150 years, Actors' Trust (formerly the Actors' Benevolent Fund) has provided a vital safety net for actors and stage management professionals across the whole of the UK. Actors' Trust has traditionally focused on supporting people in the performing arts who are unable to work for reasons beyond their control: often as a result of illness, injury or old age. Actors' Trust distributes more than £1 million each year in financial assistance.

That core mission remains unchanged: what has changed is the nature and scale of the pressures facing today's acting and stage management profession. Post pandemic, short term contracts are now the norm, the cost of living has increased, Arts funding has decreased and theatres are closing, as well as the increasing rise of AI causing fear and uncertainty: all of this makes the industry harder today than it was in previous years and doesn't show any signs of improving.

Building evidence to increase impact

To ensure that future Actors' Trust support is targeted where it can make the greatest difference, it is essential that we have an accurate picture of the UK acting and stage management community's size, make-up and welfare needs.

Actors' Trust has therefore commissioned the first independent, large-scale study of the acting and stage management profession. Carried out in 2025 by The Insight Fountain, the robust, mixed-methods research combined a large quantitative survey with in-depth qualitative interviews. Nearly 3,700 actors and stage management professionals took part, making this the most comprehensive study of its kind.

Who makes up the profession today?

Actors' Trust estimates the number of professional UK actors which it seeks to assist as being 64,000, with around 10,000 dependent children. We estimate also that there are around 3,000 stage management professionals in the UK.

The findings of the new research reveal a community that is young, freelance, London-centred and diverse.

Actors and stage management are younger than the UK population overall, with the majority aged between 18 and 44, and heavily concentrated in London. The community is more ethnically diverse and more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than the general UK population. At the same time it remains skewed towards people from professional social backgrounds, highlighting persistent barriers to entry

for those from working-class families.

Health issues and caring responsibilities are significant factors affecting the community. A relatively high number of actors and stage management identify as neurodivergent (44% of actors, 37% of stage management), and a substantial minority (24% of actors and 28% of stage management) are carers for someone with a long-term health condition or problems related to old age, most often a family member.

Key challenges facing actors and stage management

Actors and stage management have told us that working patterns in the industry negatively impact their quality of life, mental wellbeing and socialisation, in a number of different ways. These include:

- irregular hours;
- financial insecurity;
- struggling to maintain work-life balance;
- lack of career progression;
- inadequate working conditions; and
- lack of respect from those in positions of authority and a culture of silence.

Other workplace problems tend to be more common among stage management than actors. Nearly eight in ten stage management (79%) say that their work

The acting and stage management community remains skewed towards people from professional social backgrounds, highlighting persistent barriers to entry for those from working-class families.

makes it difficult for them to sustain personal relationships, compared to a little over half of the actors (51%) that we surveyed. Stage management are more likely than actors to report having experienced various inappropriate behaviours in the workplace over the last three years, with just over half (51%) saying that they had experienced a problem with abusive behaviour from someone in a position of power (compared with 24% of actors).

Across the research, three interlinked challenges stand out in particular: financial instability, poor mental wellbeing and loneliness.

Financial instability is a defining feature of working life. Most actors cannot rely on acting alone for their income, with 81% having to take on additional non-acting work to make ends meet. Incomes are low compared with UK averages (median yearly incomes from all sources are £17,000 for current actors and £25,000 for stage management, compared to £37,430 for full-time employees across the UK, and a National Living Wage equivalent of £22,222), and money worries are widespread. Stage management are more likely than actors to find paid work in their field, but they face their own pressures, including short-term contracts and long, unsociable hours.

Mental health challenges are significantly more prevalent within the profession than in the general UK population. Actors and stage management report lower life satisfaction and happiness, and markedly higher levels of anxiety. Around three quarters of actors (78%) and stage management (74%) say they have experienced a problem with their mental health, including feeling anxious or depressed, in the last three years (in comparison, 20% of UK adults report having ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition). Levels of thoughts of self-harm

or suicide are particularly concerning, especially among younger and emerging professionals. 27% of actors say that in the last 12 months they had a problem with thoughts that they would be better off dead, or thoughts of hurting themselves. In comparison, NHS England statistics show that 7% of adults have reported suicidal thoughts in the past year and the rate of lifetime self-harm is 10%.

Loneliness and social isolation are widespread: over three quarters of actors (77%) and more than eight in ten stage management (85%) report feeling lonely in the past year, with around a third (33% of actors and 31% of stage management) experiencing this often. The transient nature of freelance working, irregular hours, long periods between contracts, lack of money for socialising and the increasing prevalence of self-tapes and online auditions all contribute to this. Being in work does not necessarily protect against isolation: long hours, touring and intense but short-lived professional relationships can exacerbate it.

Gaps in existing support: the case for action

When difficulties arise, most actors and stage management rely on informal support: from friends and family, or support from their doctor/GP. Some say that they piece support together privately, often at personal cost. NHS services and generic mental health provision are valued, but they are seen as being ill-suited to the realities of freelance, precarious creative work.

There is a strong appetite for more wide-ranging, industry-specific support: financial help linked to working patterns within the industry; mental health services delivered by professionals who understand the sector; opportunities for social connection, and clear advice and signposting.

Looking to the future

The new research demonstrates both the scale of unmet need within the acting and stage management community, and the opportunity to both prevent and intervene earlier, more visibly and more effectively. Armed with this evidence, Actors' Trust will look to expand its range of support, not only responding to crises but proactively supporting resilience, wellbeing and sustainability across creative careers. Actors' Trust now has the insight it needs to target resources where they can have the greatest benefit. But Actors' Trust cannot act alone in this: we need producers, broadcasters, platforms, funders, policymakers and audiences all to work together, to create a performing arts sector that supports those who work in it.

“People don't understand the amount of time you have to spend just struggling and working with no time for socialising; nor what the industry is like such as the dynamics of a set or the power imbalances. And it's like people don't really care, and you're too busy trying to survive and pay the rent.”

INTRODUCTION

Supporting the acting and stage management community

For nearly 150 years, Actors' Trust (formerly the Actors' Benevolent Fund) has provided a vital safety net for actors and stage management professionals in the UK. Established in 1882, the charity has long focused on supporting those facing hardship as a result of illness, injury or old age, distributing more than £1 million each year in financial assistance.

Actors' Trust exists to help people in the performing arts when they are unable to work for reasons beyond their control. This mission remains unchanged. What has changed is the scale and nature of the challenges facing today's acting and stage management profession, and the breadth of support required to meet those challenges.

A new strategy for a changing industry

In response to growing financial insecurity, rising mental health pressures and a changing profession, in 2024 Actors' Trust launched a new strategy: Acting for Impact.

This strategy marks a significant evolution in the charity's role. Alongside grant-making, it commits us to developing a broader portfolio of support across three key, interlocking areas:

- **Financial support**, including assistance during periods of unexpected hardship
- **Health and wellbeing**, with new mental health services and prevention initiatives

- **Social connectedness**, addressing isolation and loneliness, and helping to make creative careers sustainable in the long term.

New Actors' Trust services have been introduced as a result: they include a dedicated helpline, a partnership providing 24/7 mental health crisis support, wellbeing workshops involving specialist organisations such as British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM), and digital tools designed to help individuals financially.

Actors' Trust distributes more than £1 million each year in financial assistance



To ensure that future support is targeted where it can make the greatest difference, it is essential that we base our work on robust evidence.

Building evidence to increase impact

Actors' Trust has ambitious plans to increase its support further. But to ensure that future support is targeted where it can make the greatest difference, it is essential that we base our work on robust evidence. We need as accurate and up-to-date a picture as possible of the UK acting and stage management community: the scale and make-up of that

community, where the need is greatest, where existing support is inadequate, and so where we should act as a priority. Armed with this evidence, we will be able to take a more proactive approach in providing support.

In 2025 Actors' Trust commissioned independent research specialist Becky Lewis, from The Insight Fountain, supported by Jacinta Ashworth and Rick Loyd, to carry out an independent study,

to build a reliable evidence base on the size, make-up and welfare needs of the UK acting and stage management community.

By having a clearer picture of who needs support, and why, Actors' Trust aims to focus its resources more effectively, developing services that reflect the lived experience of the people that we serve, and strengthening our role as a much-needed safety net for the performing arts sector, now and into the future.



RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

A robust, mixed-methods study

The research combined quantitative and qualitative methods, allowing Actors' Trust to understand both the scale of need across the sector and the lived experience behind the data.

Three phases of research

The study was carried out in three stages:

Phase 1: Scoping and design

Initial scoping work tested the feasibility of different research approaches, helped to

refine the research questions, and shaped the design of the main survey.

Phase 2: Quantitative survey

The core of the research was an online survey exploring working patterns, demographics and welfare needs. The survey was carried out between June and July 2025, and was promoted through a wide range of industry channels, including Spotlight, Equity, Stage Management Association, The Stage, Actors' Trust and social media.

In total, 3,595 actors and 94 stage management professionals took part in the survey. The actor sample has been weighted by age and gender to make it representative; the stage management sample is unweighted.

Phase 3: In-depth interviews

To add depth and context, qualitative interviews were carried out, via Zoom, with 20 survey respondents.

More detail on this research approach can be found in the Appendix.



KEY FINDINGS: THE SIZE AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE ACTING AND STAGE MANAGEMENT COMMUNITY

Actors' Trust estimates the number of professional UK actors who are potentially eligible for its assistance as being 64,000, with around 10,000 dependent children.¹ We estimate also that there are around 3,000 stage management professionals in the UK who are potentially eligible for Actors' Trust support.

Drawing on evidence from the 2025 quantitative survey, we have gained a detailed understanding of who makes up the UK acting and stage management community today, and the demographic characteristics that the community has, in terms of its make-up by gender, age, regional spread, sexual orientation, ethnicity, social background, relationship status, caring responsibilities (including for children) and physical health. We can compare this with the wider UK population from census data.²

The research findings combine emerging and current actors, and emerging and current stage management professionals ('emerging' meaning students in the final year, or recent graduates of relevant professional courses). People in these groups share many characteristics and face similar pressures, even when they are of different ages and at different stages of their careers.

KEY FACTS

There are around **64,000 professional UK actors** and **3,000 stage management professionals** who are potentially eligible for Actors' Trust assistance.

70% of actors and
72% of stage management
are **aged 18-44**

44% of actors and
37% of stage management
consider themselves
neurodivergent

52% of actors and
43% of stage management
(based in the UK)
live in London

58% of actors and
64% of stage management
come from **professional
backgrounds**,
which is higher than the
UK average

¹ Defined as actors who are aged 18 or older and are currently working, actively looking for work, or have worked professionally as an actor in the UK. It includes actors with at least one professional paid credit in theatre, TV, film, radio, audio, commercial, voice over work or any other paid professional acting roles, as well as actors in the final year, or recent graduates, of a professional full-time Performance Training/ Acting course at a Higher Education institution, Drama School or Conservatoire.

² Office for National Statistics, released 27 June 2025, ONS website, Census-based statistics UK: 2021.

The acting community

The acting community is younger, more London-based and more diverse than the UK population as a whole. 70% of actors who were surveyed are aged between 18 and 44, compared with under half (44%) of the UK adult population: the average age of actors is 36.

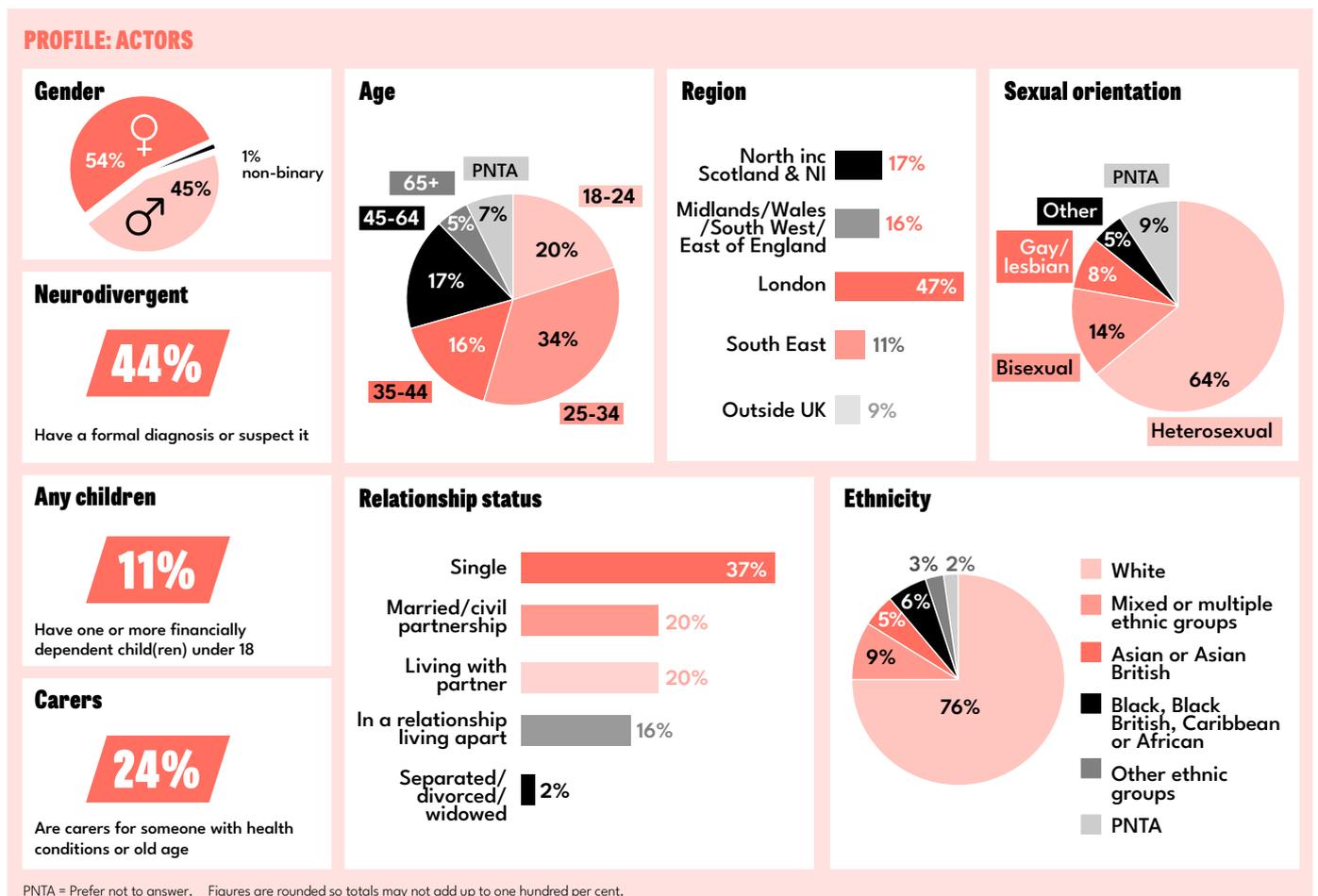
Actors are slightly more likely to be female than male (54% to 45%: 1% identify as non-binary or prefer to self-describe), broadly mirroring the national gender balance (51% to 49%). In terms of geography, actors are heavily concentrated in London: 52% of UK-based actors live in London, compared with just 13% of the general population. For many, maintaining an acting career therefore comes with additional financial pressures, given the relatively high cost of living in the capital.

The acting community is more ethnically diverse than the wider UK population. While 76% of actors are from a white background, 22% are from global majority backgrounds (a higher proportion than among UK adults overall, at 15%). Actors are also far more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than the general population, with 64% identifying as heterosexual compared to 94%.³

Family circumstances vary widely. Around four in ten actors (37%) are single, while a similar proportion (40%) are married or live with a partner. 11% have dependent children under 18, reflecting the relative youth of actors on average, and the challenges of combining freelance work with childcare. Nearly a quarter of actors (24%) report that they care for someone with a long-term physical or mental health condition or a problem related to old age, most commonly a parent.

Neurodiversity is a significant feature of the acting community: over four in ten actors (44%) consider themselves to be neurodivergent, including many without a formal diagnosis. Neurodiversity is particularly prevalent among younger actors, suggesting growing awareness but also potential unmet support needs.

In terms of social background, actors are more likely than average to come from professional backgrounds (58%). In comparison, published social mobility data suggests that 46% of UK adults in families with dependent children were in professional occupations in 2024.⁴ This pattern is consistent across age groups, indicating that there are persistent barriers to entry for those from working-class backgrounds.



3 Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 29 January 2025, ONS website, statistical bulletin, Sexual orientation, UK: 2023.

4 Social Mobility Commission, State of the Nation, 2025.

The stage management community

Stage management professionals share some characteristics with actors, but also differ in important ways. Like actors, they tend to be younger than the general population, with most (72%) being aged between 18 and 44, and they are disproportionately based in London (43% of stage management based in the UK).

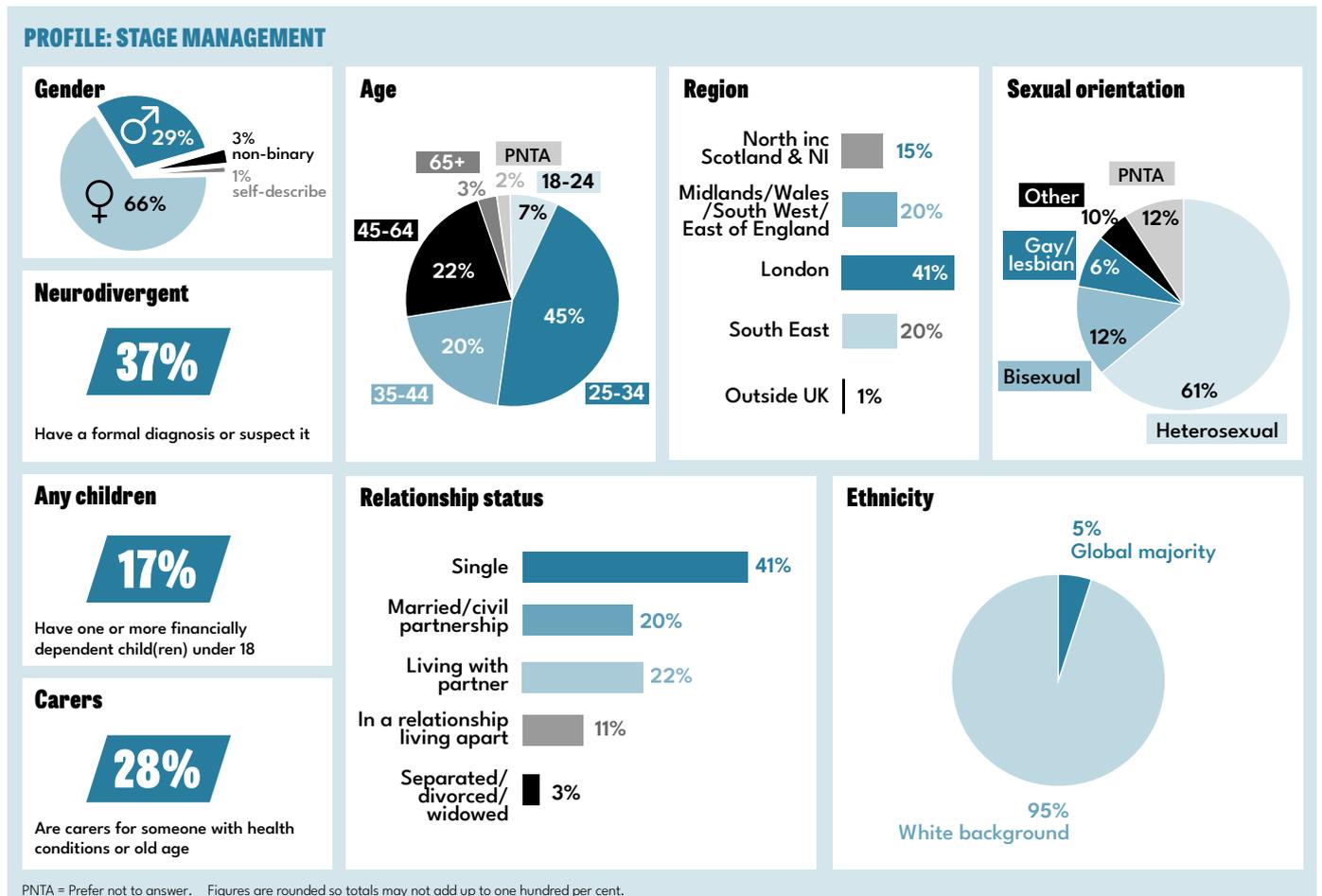
Stage management is a predominantly female profession, with 66% identifying as women. Compared with actors, stage management are less ethnically diverse and more likely (95%) to be from a white

background. They are, however, similarly more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than the general population, with only 61% identifying as heterosexual compared to 94%.

Caring responsibilities are also common among stage management. Around four in ten stage management professionals (41%) are single, while a similar proportion (43%) are married or live with a partner. 17% have dependent children, and 28% say that they care for someone with a long-term health condition or illness – again, this is most often a family member.

37% of stage management identify as neurodivergent, including a substantial number (26%) who do not have a formal diagnosis.

Stage management are even more likely than actors to come from professional social backgrounds (64%) and less likely to have parents from routine / manual / workless backgrounds (12%). This suggests that barriers relating to class and access may be particularly pronounced in this part of the industry.





KEY CHALLENGES FACING THE ACTING AND STAGE MANAGEMENT PROFESSION

The research explores a wide range of pressures affecting actors and stage management professionals, spanning financial security, mental health, working conditions, relationships and wellbeing.

Participants were asked about problems that they had experienced in the last 12 months or in the last three years. Across the findings, a clear picture emerges: financial insecurity, poor mental wellbeing and loneliness are widespread and interlinked.

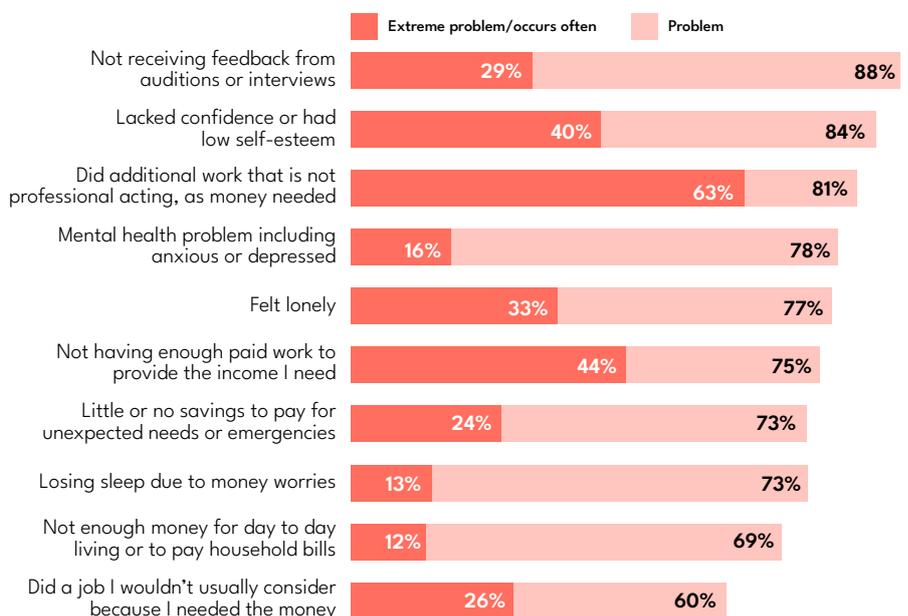
The challenges most commonly faced by actors

Actors report a high prevalence of challenges linked to irregular work, rejection and insecure income. One of the most frequently voiced frustrations is not receiving feedback after auditions, a problem reported by the majority (88%) of current actors and consistent across all age groups. This lack of feedback appears to contribute to wider issues of lack of confidence and self-worth.

Low confidence and poor self-esteem are other commonly reported (84%) challenges, alongside mental health problems and loneliness. These challenges affect actors at all career stages, though they are particularly pronounced among younger and emerging actors.

Financial pressures are also central. 81% of actors say that they needed to take on non-acting work simply to make ends meet, because they needed the money, voicing concerns about having insufficient paid acting work, little or no savings, and ongoing worries about everyday living costs. Among emerging actors, reliance on financial support from their families was also common (72%), suggesting that many enter the profession already facing economic strain.

MOST PREVALENT CHALLENGES FACED BY ACTORS



While the intensity of particular problems varies by age, the overall pattern is strikingly consistent. Mental health challenges, low self-esteem, loneliness and financial insecurity remain among the most prevalent issues throughout an actor’s working life; with physical health concerns becoming more prominent, relative to other needs, later in life.

The challenges most commonly faced by stage management professionals

Stage management share many of the same emotional and psychological pressures as actors, with 74% experiencing mental health problems in the last three years. Lack of confidence (86%) and loneliness (85%) also feature prominently, alongside frustrations around lack of feedback and recognition.

However, their working lives are shaped by a somewhat different balance of pressures. Compared with actors, stage management are less likely to report insufficient work or the need to take on additional jobs outside the sector. Instead, they are more likely to experience problems related to excessive workload, professional boundaries and relationships.

A significant proportion report having more work than they can reasonably cope with (68%), being asked to do things at

work that they feel uncomfortable with (67%), or finding that their work makes it difficult to sustain personal relationships (79%). These findings point to pressures associated with responsibility, professional hierarchies, long hours and other demands of the industry.

The most serious and persistent problems

When we focus on those issues that actors and stage management experience most intensely, some challenges stand out across both groups.

Low self-esteem and loneliness emerge as particularly serious concerns for both actors and stage management professionals. Around four in ten (40% of actors and 39% of stage management) said that they lacked confidence or had low self-esteem, and around a third (33% and 31%) said they often felt lonely.

These issues cut across age, role and career stage.

Financial pressures are especially acute for actors, many (63%) of whom say that in the last year they often had to take on additional non-acting work.

Around three in ten actors (29%) and stage management (35%) said that not receiving feedback from auditions or interviews was an ‘extreme’ problem in the last three years.

KEY FACTS

78% of actors and **74%** of stage management have experienced **problems with their mental health** in the last three years

81% of actors need to take on **non-acting work to make ends meet**, with

72% of emerging actors **relying on financial support**

84% of actors and **86%** of stage management experience **low confidence or self-esteem**, while

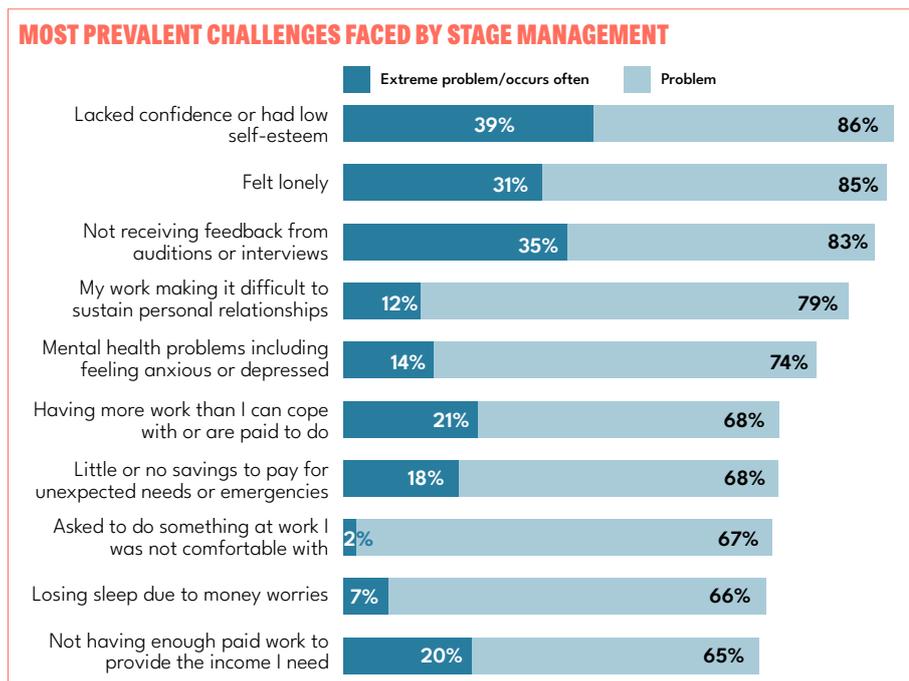
77% of actors and **85%** of stage management **feel lonely**

51% of stage management report experiencing **abusive behaviour**, and

79% say that their work makes it **difficult to sustain personal relationships**

88% of actors and

83% of stage management said that **lack of feedback** from auditions or interviews was a problem in the last three years



WORKING PATTERNS AND FINANCIAL SITUATION

Our research has helped to show how actors and stage management professionals work, how reliably they are able to secure paid roles, and what this means for their financial security and wellbeing. While there are important differences between the two groups, both have working patterns that are highly irregular, demanding and financially precarious.

Patchwork careers and insecure work

Almost all survey respondents had had some form of paid professional acting or stage management work in the past year, but the nature of that work varies sharply between actors and stage management.

Actors are as likely to have worked in non-acting jobs as in professional acting roles. Three quarters (75%) did not have enough paid acting work to provide the income they needed in the last year, and many combine acting with other work or spend periods unemployed and actively seeking work.

Stage management professionals, by contrast, are more likely to have secured paid professional work within their field. However, 46% still experienced periods of unemployment during the previous year, reflecting the short-term nature of freelance contracts.

The research shows that portfolio careers are now the norm, particularly for actors, and that consistent, predictable employment is rare.

KEY FACTS

78% of actors found it **difficult to secure paid acting work** in the last year.

46% of stage management experienced **periods of unemployment** in the previous year.

68% of actors spent most of the last year doing **something other than professional acting**: either in **non-acting work (51%)** or **unemployed and seeking work (17%)**.

75% of actors **did not have enough paid work** to provide the income they needed in the last year.

Median annual income is **£17,000 for actors** and **£25,000 for stage management** (UK full-time median: £37,430). The National Living Wage equivalent is £22,222 (£12.21 per hour, assuming a standard 35-hour working week).



Types of professional work

Actors say that they work across an increasingly diverse range of roles. Alongside film, television and theatre, some had undertaken work in commercials, voiceover, immersive and site-specific performance, in pantomime, on cruise ships, in live attractions and in digital formats. This diversity reflects the adaptability that many actors need: within the industry they often have to pursue multiple types of work, as well as frequently working in non-acting roles in order to stay afloat.

Stage management work is more concentrated, with the vast majority of stage management (98%) having worked in theatre, particularly on non-touring productions (84%). Some work on touring shows, as resident stage managers, or as company management and stage management for live events.

Outside of their profession, actors in particular work across a remarkably wide range of sectors, including arts and entertainment, education, hospitality, retail, leisure, media, marketing, and healthcare. In qualitative interviews actors describe their portfolio careers as being flexible but sometimes chaotic, requiring constant adjustment to manage fluctuating income.

Difficulty finding work

For actors, the difficulty of securing paid professional work is a defining feature of working life. A large majority (78%) say that they found it hard to find acting roles in the previous year: some described the process of looking for acting work as demoralising and opaque. The most common frustrations are not being invited to auditions, not hearing back after auditions, and work being pencilled in but never confirmed.

Stage management paint a more mixed picture. While some (39%) find work relatively easily, others (38%) struggle for a variety of reasons, such as having to turn down poorly paid jobs or finding that available work does not match their skills or experience.

Workload pressures also differ markedly. Actors are far more likely to report being underworked and needing to take on additional jobs outside the profession in order to survive financially (75% said that they had a problem with not having enough paid work, and 60% had done work they wouldn't usually do because they needed money). Stage management, meanwhile, are more likely to report being overworked (68%) than underworked (65%), describing excessive hours, lack of rest between contracts, and little control over time off.

FINANCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE LAST THREE YEARS



73% of actors (66% of stage management) experienced losing sleep due to money worries



69% of actors (59% of stage management) experienced not having enough money for day to day living and bills

Workplace pressures and power imbalances

Both groups report significant workplace challenges. **The lack of feedback after auditions or interviews was a near-universal frustration and a major source of stress.**

Current stage management, however, are particularly likely to report problems linked to working conditions and power dynamics. These include being asked to do things that they are uncomfortable with (67%), feeling physically unsafe at work (45%), or fearing that speaking up will harm their future employment prospects (57%). Some describe a culture in which endurance and silence are implicitly expected.

Actors and stage management describe how working patterns in the industry, with irregular hours, financial insecurity, difficulties in maintaining work-life balance, lack of career progression, inadequate working conditions, lack of respect from those in positions of authority and a culture of silence, have a negative impact on their quality of life, mental wellbeing and socialisation.

Other workplace problems tend to be more common among stage management professionals than among actors. Stage management are more likely than actors to report having experienced various inappropriate behaviours in the workplace over the last three years: for example, slightly more than half (51%) say that they have experienced a problem with abusive behaviour from someone in a position of power, as compared with nearly a quarter (24%) of actors.

Qualitative interviews reinforce these findings, highlighting a working environment in which long hours, blurred boundaries and limited protection can take a serious toll on wellbeing.





Income levels and financial precariousness

Income figures underline the financial fragility of much of the profession. Median annual income from all sources is modest for both actors and stage management. Income from professional acting alone is minimal for many, meaning that most actors rely heavily on other work or support to survive.

For those taking part in this survey, the median total pre-tax income in the 12 months from 6 April 2024 to 5 April 2025 from all sources was £17,000 for actors and £25,000 for stage management: the median annual income for full-time employees in the UK is £37,430.⁵ The National Living Wage equivalent is £22,222 (£12.21 per hour, assuming a standard 35-hour working week).

Widespread financial stress

Financial problems are common across both groups. Many (73% of actors, 68% of stage management) say that they have had a problem with little or no savings, with losing sleep due to money worries (73%/ 66%), or not having enough money for day to day living or to pay bills (69%/ 59%). In the last three years, over a third (39%/ 35%) have made late payments or missed them altogether. A quarter of actors (24%) have an extreme problem with lack of savings to cover emergencies.

Qualitative interviews paint a picture of financial insecurity: relying on overdrafts, juggling multiple jobs, navigating benefits systems, and depending on partners or family for support. Financial strain is repeatedly linked to anxiety, low self-esteem and social isolation, with people in the profession saying that they are unable to afford basic social activities or plan for the future.

Several also point to the upfront costs of pursuing work (for training, headshots, self-tapes, travel etc), meaning that financial pressure often begins for them long before they find paid work.

⁵ National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates, Gov.uk, 2025. Employee earnings in the UK:2024, ONS, 2024.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The research finds that actors and stage management have significantly poorer mental wellbeing than the UK population as a whole, with anxiety being particularly high. Mental health challenges are widespread, affecting people across different career stages, and they are closely linked to precarious working patterns and financial insecurity. While many actors and stage management find great meaning and fulfilment in their work, the structure and culture of the industry often intensify existing vulnerabilities.

Personal wellbeing: below national averages

Using the UK Government's standard personal wellbeing measures, both actors and stage management report lower life satisfaction, lower rates of happiness, a weaker sense that life is worthwhile, and greater anxiety than UK adults overall. The gap is widest in relation to anxiety: almost four in ten actors (39%) and over a third of stage management (34%) report high levels of anxiety, compared with fewer than a quarter (23%) of UK adults as a whole.⁶

KEY FACTS

39% of actors and **34%** of stage management report **high anxiety**, compared with 23% of UK adults.

84% of actors and **86%** of stage management experienced **low confidence or self-esteem** in the past year.

78% of actors and **74%** of stage management have experienced **mental health problems** in the past three years.

(National statistics show that 20% of UK adults report having ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition).⁷

27% of actors and **24%** of stage management had thoughts of **self-harm** or felt that they would be **better off dead** in the past year.

(National statistics for NHS England show that lifetime self-harm among adults was 10%, and 7% of adults have reported suicidal thoughts in the past year).⁸

Among actors aged 25-44, 32% report suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm.

⁶ Office for National Statistics, released 28 November 2025, ONS website, Annual Population Survey April-June 2025.

⁷ Our Future Health, NHS research programme, Dec 2025 data.

⁸ Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS): Survey of mental health and wellbeing, England 2023/4, NHS England, 2025.



Just that niggling away self doubt that then creeps into your everyday life. I've had it affect friendships, I've had it affect relationships...



High prevalence of mental health challenges

Mental health difficulties are widespread across the community:

- Around three quarters of actors and stage management (78%/ 74%) say that they have had mental health problems in the past three years.
- One in seven (14%) actors and one in six (17%) stage management currently live with a limiting long-term mental health condition.

Mental health challenges are more pronounced among younger and emerging actors, being most prevalent among those aged 25-34.

Confidence, self-esteem and body image

Low confidence and poor self-esteem are extensive:

- Over eight in ten actors and stage management (84%/ 86%) say that they lacked confidence or had low self-esteem in the past year.
- Body image concerns and eating disorders are also highly prevalent, affecting around six in ten actors (59%) and over half of stage management (53%), and disproportionately affecting younger and emerging actors.

Suicidal thoughts and self-harm

A particularly concerning finding is the prevalence of thoughts of suicide or self-harm:

- Around a quarter of actors and stage management (27%/ 24%) say that they have had thoughts of self-harm, or felt that they would be better off dead, in the past year.
- Rates are substantially higher among emerging actors (40%) and far exceed estimates of the general population.



Body image concerns and eating disorders are also highly prevalent

How the profession affects mental health

Structural pressures, even when in work

Interviewees describe an industry that is characterised by competition, uncertainty and lack of progression. Hard work is not reliably rewarded, pay is often low relative to effort, and there is often no clear career pathway. This erodes self-esteem and creates a sense of powerlessness. Many also feel pressure (from their peers or from wider society) to appear successful, even during long periods without work.

When out of work: uncertainty and invisibility

The most severe mental health impacts are often felt between contracts:

- Financial insecurity creates chronic anxiety.
- The shift to self-tape (rather than in-person) auditions, combined with lack of feedback, intensifies self-doubt and rumination.
- Repeated rejection (or silence) leads to feelings of invisibility and loss of identity.
- Irregular routines and isolation exacerbate low mood and anxiety.

For many, acting is central to their sense of self, so not working can feel like personal failure.

When in work: intensity and burnout

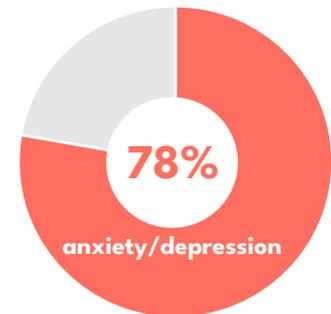
Paid work brings different pressures:

- Long, irregular hours and intense workloads make it difficult to maintain relationships, attend health appointments, or recover from work physically and mentally.
- Stage management, in particular, report extreme overwork, but fear speaking up about their working conditions.
- The industry can make limited accommodation for physical or mental health needs, such as rest breaks or access to treatment.

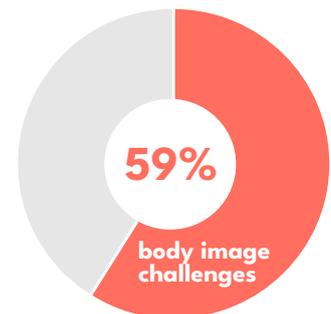
Interviewees describe a culture of silence, in which raising concerns or asking for support risks future employment.

Yet despite the financial insecurity, overwork and psychological strain that they experience, a number of interviewees said that they remain in the industry because the work provides them with a strong sense of meaning, identity and fulfilment. Acting and stage management are described not simply as jobs but as vocations: interviewees spoke about the creative intensity of performance, the privilege of storytelling, the camaraderie of rehearsal rooms and production teams, and the deep bonds that they form with colleagues. For many, these intrinsic rewards are powerful enough to sustain their commitment to the industry, despite the challenges.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN THE LAST THREE YEARS



78% of actors (74% of stage management) experienced a mental health problem including feeling anxious or depressed



59% of actors (53% of stage management) experienced body image challenges or eating disorders



There are days where I just can't be bothered, I'm just so sad. Like, there are certain days where I'm like, 'Great, let's get up and do those tapes' and then there are definitely days where I'm like, 'Oh, no matter how many tapes I send nobody's calling me back.' Yes, so it plays into your mental health.



**SOCIAL VULNERABILITIES IN THE
LAST 12 MONTHS**



86% of stage management
(84% of actors) experienced
low confidence or self-esteem



27% of actors (24% of stage
management) had thoughts that
they would be better off dead,
or of hurting themselves



LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Loneliness and social isolation are widespread among actors and stage management, affecting people at all career stages, but particularly younger and emerging professionals. The research findings show levels of loneliness that are far higher among actors and stage management than in the general population, as reported by the Office for National Statistics (77%/ 85% compared to 25%), driven in part by working patterns and the absence of stable workplace communities.

KEY FACTS

77% of actors and

85% of stage management felt **lonely** in the past year.

85% of actors aged 25-34 felt **lonely** often or some of the time.

19% of stage management say they have **no one they can call** on to socialise with.

National surveys suggest that around a quarter of GB adults (25%) feel lonely at least some of the time, and only a small minority (6%) feel lonely often.⁹ By contrast, loneliness among actors and stage management is widespread. The transient nature of freelance work makes it difficult to form lasting or meaningful connections, or to maintain romantic relationships or friendships: long working hours, irregular schedules and frequent travel also contribute to this.

Loneliness: scale and severity

Loneliness is one of the most commonly reported challenges among actors and stage management:

- Over three quarters of actors (77%) and more than eight in ten stage management (85%) say that they have felt lonely in the past year.
- Actors aged 25-34 are especially affected, with 85% saying they often or sometimes feel lonely.



Relationships formed during a production are often intense but short-lived, ending abruptly when a contract finishes. Many interviewees describe the emotional drop that follows the end of a production: transitioning suddenly from daily collaboration to being alone again.

Social connectedness and support networks

The survey has explored people's access to social support:

- Actors report stronger social connections than stage management, but both groups are below national averages.
- 78% of stage management say that they have someone they can call on to socialise with (in comparison, 92% of adults in England say they do).¹⁰
- 89% of stage management say that they have someone they could rely on to listen if they needed to talk (in comparison, 95% of adults in England say they do).

Overall, stage management appear to be at greater risk of social isolation, reflecting long working hours, frequent touring and intense workloads.

How the profession contributes to loneliness

The transient nature of freelance acting makes it difficult to form lasting or meaningful connections, due to:

- Long stretches of time alone, searching for work and preparing self-tapes, limits everyday social contact.
- The move away from face-to-face auditions has removed an important source of peer interaction.
- Financial insecurity restricts socialising and participation in everyday activities.

- Exhaustion from the demands of juggling multiple jobs leaves little time or energy for friendships.

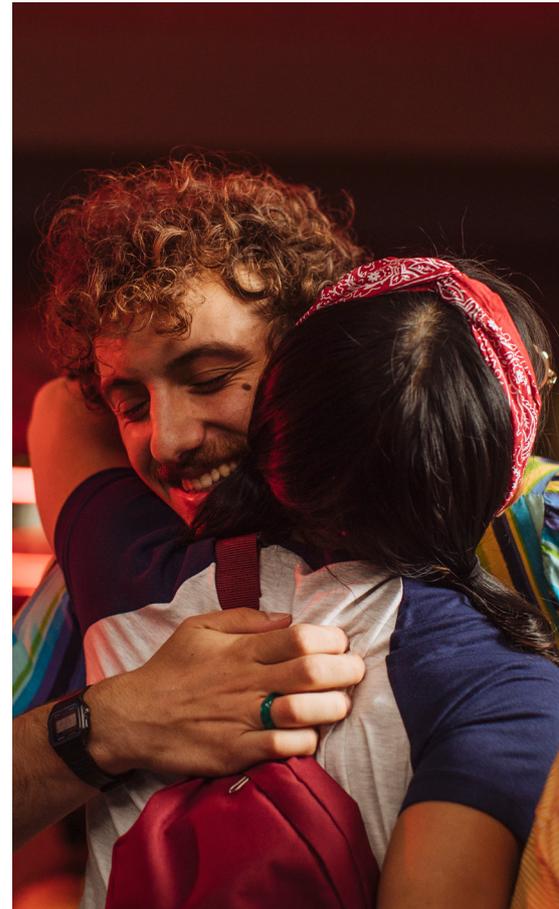
Some actors say that they feel that non-actor friends do not understand their working patterns, or they can feel judged for pursuing a career in an industry that is perceived as unstable or indulgent.

Relationships within the industry

Forming close relationships with other actors can also be difficult:

- Professional networks often blur personal relationships, making trust and intimacy harder to establish.
- Competition for roles can inhibit openness and lead to social distancing.
- Feelings of jealousy or comparison may emerge when peers have greater success.

As a result, some actors say that they have wide networks of acquaintances but few deep friendships.



A lot of actors work in the gig economy. They don't really have any immediate work friends. You kind of live a bit of a lonely life ...



“
I find freelancing so hard. You spend such a concentrated amount of time with all these people, most of the time you make really good friends, and then that’s it. You’re on your own again. That’s a challenging yo yo.
 ”

Loneliness when in work

Being in paid work does not necessarily protect against isolation:

- Irregular and long hours, evening work and short-term contracts make it difficult to sustain friendships outside of the industry.
- Touring and working away from home disrupt family life and romantic relationships.
- Stage management in particular report being overworked, leaving little time for a social life.

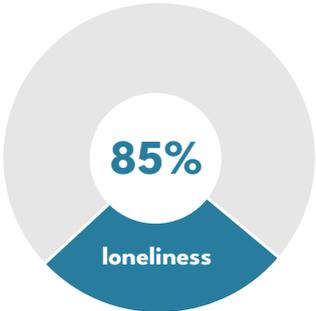
Relationships formed during a production are often intense but short-lived, ending abruptly when a contract finishes. Many interviewees describe the emotional drop that follows the end of a production: transitioning suddenly from daily collaboration to being alone again.

A freelance profession without a community

A recurring theme in the research findings is the absence of a stable workplace community:

- Most actors and stage management are freelance, without regular colleagues or employer-led social structures.
- There are no default spaces for informal connection, peer support or shared reflection.
- This lack of continuity amplifies loneliness, especially during periods of unemployment.

LONELINESS IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS



85% of stage management (77% of actors) experienced loneliness





CONCLUSION

This research has given us an unprecedented insight into the lived experiences of the UK acting and stage management profession.

We have seen how working patterns within the industry and financial insecurity combine with mental health challenges, loneliness, lack of confidence and difficulties in maintaining social connections. Actors and stage management face a combination of pressures, yet they remain passionate about their work and the performing

arts because of the meaning, creativity and connection it provides. At the same time, the research highlights gaps in support: many actors and stage management rely on informal networks or general services that are not tailored to the unique demands of work in the performing arts.

Armed with this new knowledge, Actors' Trust is expanding its support in targeted, evidence-based ways. We have enhanced our grants programme, we have launched a new mental health service specifically for performing arts professionals, and we are rolling out peer support initiatives to address the widespread loneliness identified in this research.

This work cannot be done in isolation. To make lasting changes within the industry we need producers, broadcasters, platforms, funders, policymakers and audiences all to work together to create safe, empowering environments that respect the dignity, health and wellbeing of actors and stage management.

This includes providing fair and sustainable working conditions, stamping out inappropriate behaviour, and encouraging open, safe communication. Additionally, offering timely feedback on auditions would go a long way to providing greater certainty and improving mental wellbeing.

By collaborating across the industry, we can ensure that the wonder of the performing arts is provided by a resilient, supported and connected community of actors and stage management professionals.



APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODS

The research, carried out by The Insight Fountain, was conducted in three main phases: scoping, a quantitative survey with associated sizing work, and qualitative in-depth interviews.

Phase 1: Scoping

The scoping phase assessed the feasibility of estimating the size of the acting and stage management profession, and refined the design of the subsequent quantitative survey. Desk research reviewed existing, publicly available evidence relevant to the research objectives. Twelve stakeholder interviews were carried out with current and former actors, stage management professionals, agents and Actors' Trust staff and trustees, alongside informal discussions with actors and former actors. Meetings were also held with representatives from Equity, Spotlight and Stage Management Association to seek their guidance on approaches to population definitions and sizing. By the end of this phase, target population definitions had been agreed, an approach to sizing the community was devised, and a strategy developed for sampling and promoting the online survey. Key topic areas for inclusion in the questionnaire were also agreed.

Phase 2a: Quantitative online survey

Phase 2 involved a 15-minute online survey that was carried out between 12 June and 6 July 2025. Screening questions ensured that only respondents meeting Actors' Trust definitions of professional acting or stage management were included. The survey included questions pertinent to sizing the community, and covered demographic details for profiling, information about working patterns and workplace needs, and respondents' personal financial situations, health and welfare needs.

The survey was promoted through multiple channels, including Spotlight, Stage Management Association, Equity, The Stage, Actors' Trust communications and social media, drama schools and a research panel (3Gem). Respondents could only complete the survey once, although some may have received invitations from more than one source.

In total, 3,595 actors and 94 stage management professionals responded.

The actor sample included both:

- current actors (with at least one paid professional credit and actively seeking or open to work) and

- emerging actors (final-year students or recent graduates with a full-time professional performance training qualification).

The stage management sample included:

- current stage management (with at least one professional/ paid production in a UK theatre and still actively looking for work or open to working in stage management), and
- emerging stage management (currently studying in final year or graduated in the last 12 months with a full-time Stage Management/ Technical Theatre qualification at a Higher Education institution).

Emerging and current actors were weighted by age and gender so that the survey data would be as reflective of the profession as possible. The weighting targets were derived from industry numbers, including those provided by Spotlight and Equity. Stage management data was not weighted due to the small sample size and absence of population data with which to set targets.

Phase 2b: Sizing estimates

Sizing work undertaken in the summer of 2025 estimated the size of the community potentially eligible for Actors' Trust support, using industry data (including from Equity, Spotlight and Stage Management Association), stakeholder input and survey findings. The professional UK actor community was estimated at between 62,000 and 67,000, with a best estimate of 64,000 adults aged 18+ who are working or actively seeking work, or have worked professionally as actors in the UK. This includes actors with at least one professional credit, or those in their final year or recent graduates with a relevant qualification. Child actors, amateurs, extras and non-actor performers were excluded. The number of dependent children financially reliant on these actors was estimated at between 10,000 and 11,000, with a best estimate of 10,500. This has been rounded to 10,000.

The professional stage management community was estimated at between 2,800 and 3,800, with a best estimate of 3,250. This has been rounded to 3,000, including those who have worked on at least one professional/ paid production in the UK, and final year students or recent graduates with a relevant qualification who are actively seeking work.

Phase 3: Qualitative interviews

The final phase explored issues highlighted by the survey, particularly mental health, loneliness, working patterns and financial insecurity. Twenty confidential in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom between September and October 2025, with survey respondents who had reported mental health difficulties, social isolation, workload or financial problems. Interviews lasted up to 45 minutes and followed a topic guide.

Participants were selected from survey respondents who had agreed to further contact. The sample was varied in terms of gender, age, location and personal circumstances, with substantial overlap between those who had experienced mental health difficulties and loneliness.



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