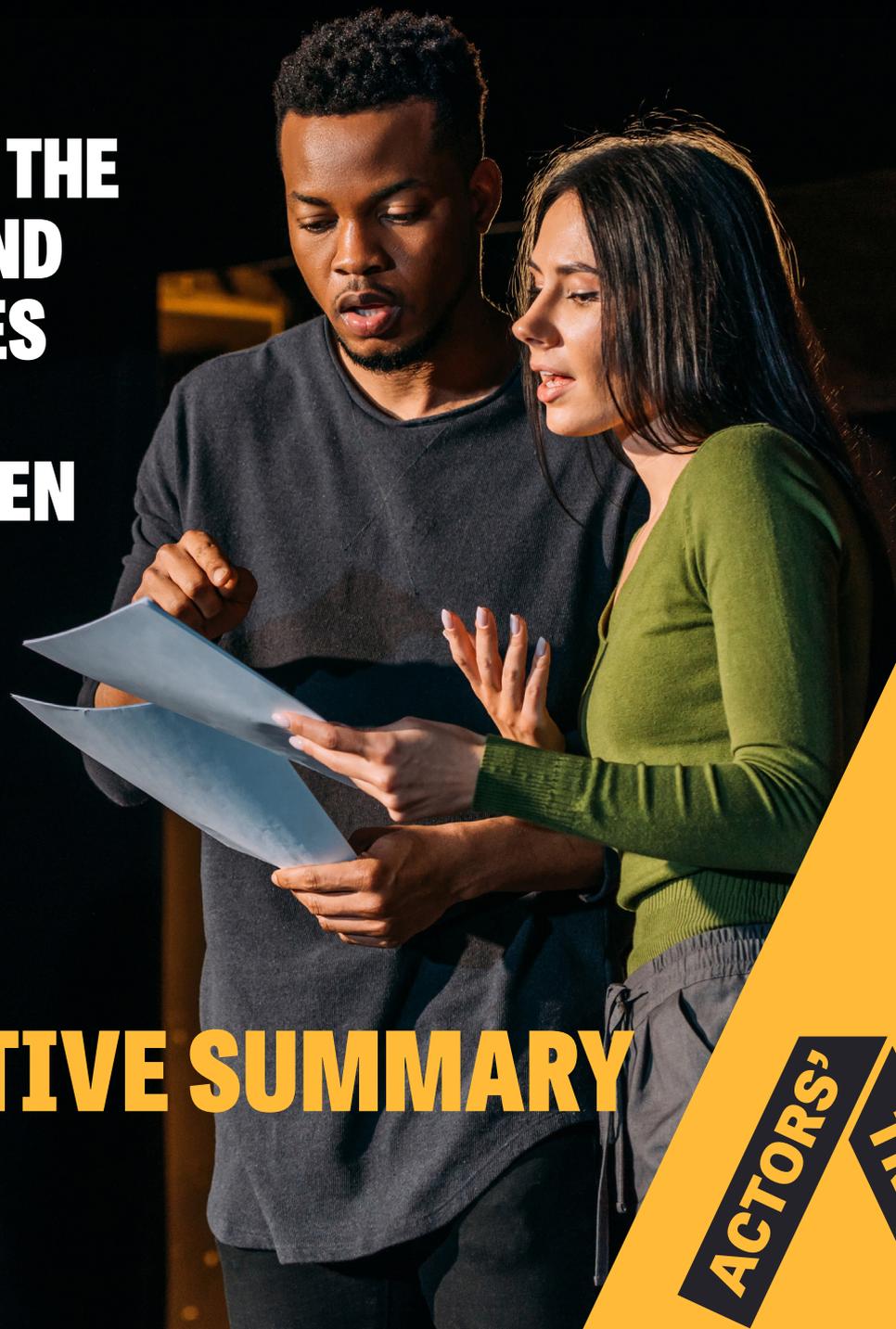


SPOTLIGHTS AND SHADOWS

MAPPING THE
PEOPLE AND
PRESSURES
OF STAGE
AND SCREEN



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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



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:



Seven in ten actors (69%) have experienced **not having enough money for day to day living**

73% of actors and 66% of stage management have experienced **losing sleep due to money worries**

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.

KEY FACTS – SIZE AND DEMOGRAPHICS

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

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.

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.

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 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

KEY FACTS – LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

- 77%** of actors and **85%** of stage management felt **lonely in the past year** (GB adult population comparison: 25%).³
- 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**.

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

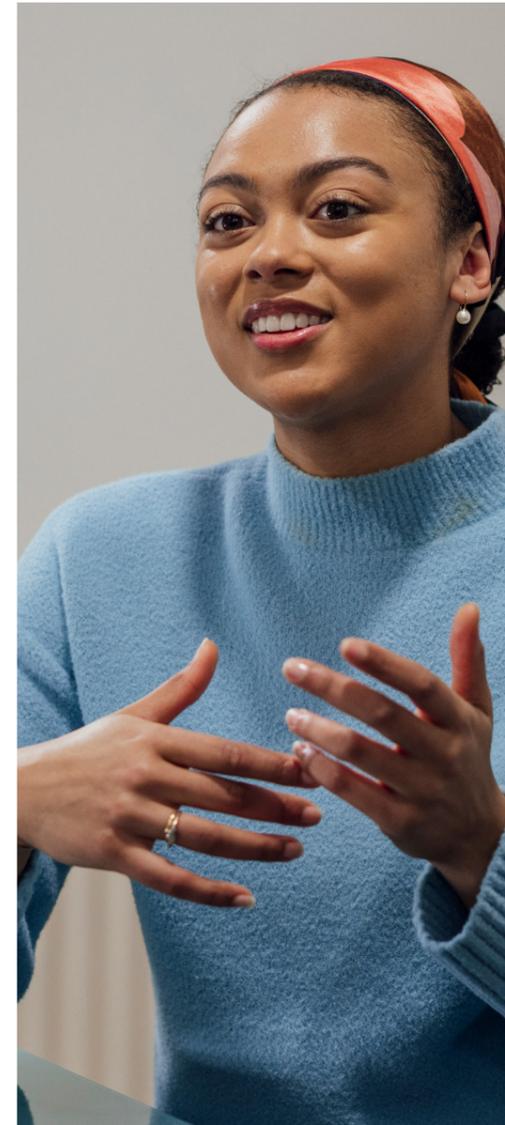
When difficulties arise, most actors and stage management rely on informal

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. ”

KEY FACTS – MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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).¹

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).²

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

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

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

3 Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN), Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: personal well-being and loneliness, ONS website, ONS, 2025.



www.actorstrust.org.uk

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