

Arts Council England's Developing Your Creative Practice programme

Independent evaluation



Executive Summary

Developing Your Creative Practice

1. Arts Council England introduced the Developing Your Creative Practice (DYCP) programme in 2018 to support the development of independent cultural and creative practitioners. DYCP provides grants to enable practitioners to commit time and money towards developing their practice. DYCP aims to encourage creativity, research, experimentation and risk taking, to enable practitioners to progress and flourish with their creative practice and career. It is expected that this innovation will be of public benefit by leading to the production and dissemination of higher quality work.
2. Grants range from £2,000 to £10,000 (plus ‘personal access costs’¹) and projects generally run for up to 12 months.² Over 11 rounds of funding, DYCP received over 18,000 applications, of which 3,713 (20%) were successful, receiving £33m across 3,670 individuals.

The context for DYCP

3. Data from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) estimates that 49% of jobs in the ‘Cultural Sector’ were self-employed in 2019.³ The Creative Industries Federation⁴ identified common issues experienced by freelancers, including financial insecurity due to difficulties accessing work and funding, leading to challenges for creative and cultural practitioners to sustain and flourish in their careers as freelancers.
4. The COVID-19 pandemic presented “the biggest threat to the UK’s cultural infrastructure, institutions and workforce in a generation”⁵ and risked “talent drain.”⁶ The UK government responded with economic support for the workforce and businesses,⁷ but around 10% of the UK workforce were not eligible, with freelancers and sole traders particularly likely to be ineligible.⁸

¹ Costs needed to support any access needs throughout the activity.

² Where an extension is granted projects can run for up to 24 months.

³ Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Office for National Statistics. [DCMS Sectors Economic Estimates 2019: Employment](#).

⁴ Creative Industries Federation. 2017. [Creative Freelancers](#).

⁵ Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. 2020. [Impact of COVID-19 on DCMS sectors: First Report](#), p.27.

⁶ Ibid, p. 24.

⁷ Including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme and the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, as well as numerous other packages of support.

⁸ Henry, N et al. 2021. [Building Back Better? Creative Freelancers and Learning from the Covid-19 Experience](#).

5. Arts Council England's *Let's Create (Strategy 2020-2030)*⁹ presents a 'case for change' which includes two challenges facing the sector that are particularly pertinent to DYCP:
- Many creative practitioners and leaders of cultural organisations report a retreat from innovation, risk-taking and sustained talent development
 - There remains persistent and widespread lack of diversity across the creative industries and in publicly funded cultural organisations.
6. There is also recognition that people from some backgrounds are more likely to sustain a creative or cultural career than others, and the strategy notes that some locations have historically benefitted less from Arts Council England funding, with a need to address this.

Evaluation overview

7. Arts Council England commissioned SQW in October 2021 to undertake a process and impact evaluation of DYCP, running to March 2022. The following evaluation questions were posed:
- To what extent has DYCP achieved expected outcomes and met its original aims?
 - Has the programme helped individuals to sustain a career within the sector? Have different groups been impacted in different ways, how and why?
 - Did interim changes to the programme help to support individuals? (Round 8 onwards)
 - What can be learned from how the Rounds 1-9 were delivered? What is working well, and less well, for whom and why?
 - Are there specific barriers that cultural practitioners working in the Museums or Libraries sector face? What are the reasons they don't apply to the programme?
 - What could be improved and what recommendations are there for future development of DYCP? Are there gaps that could be addressed in future rounds?
 - What barriers did unsuccessful applicants face in reapplying? Would anything in particular have helped them to take the appropriate next steps?
8. To address the questions, the evaluation consisted of the following research strands:
- Scoping interviews – with Arts Council England staff involved in DYCP, and two Arts Council England senior leaders.
 - Review of project documentation – a review of public facing DYCP materials such as guidance and application and activity forms, plus internal evaluation materials.

⁹ Arts Council England. 2020. [Let's Create](#).

- Analysis of monitoring data – monitoring data captured via the application process and the end of project activity form for Rounds 1-11 was reviewed and analysed.
- Surveys – two online surveys were designed and implemented, one with successful applicants and another with unsuccessful applicants. A total of 548 unsuccessful and 785 successful applicants responded, out of a total of 3,955 survey recipients.
- Interviews – semi-structured telephone/video call interviews with 38 successful and 9 unsuccessful applicants to capture reflections on DYCP and emerging outcomes.

Key findings

Awareness

9. Arts Council England undertakes limited active marketing of DYCP due to limited resource being available for promotion and the already high level of applications received. The promotion that does take place is as part of the Arts Council's broader promotion of its sector support. In limited cases this is targeted at underrepresented disciplines, roles and groups.
10. Visual Arts and Music receive considerably more applications than other disciplines, and have some of the lowest success rates as a result; Museums and Libraries receive few applications, with relatively high success rates. London receives the most applications.
11. Applicants typically became aware of DYCP through Arts Council England's website; next most common were friends/family/colleagues/peers and organisations other than the Arts Council. Successful applicants are more likely to have heard about DYCP via word of mouth than unsuccessful applicants. The range of organisations raising awareness of DYCP is notable, with some running advice sessions and workshops on DYCP and how to apply. This highlights the important role that networks and sector support organisations can play in supporting those less aware of Arts Council England and its funding opportunities to discover DYCP.

Understanding of DYCP and motivations for applying

12. Motivations for applying to DYCP were perhaps unsurprising given programme aims. They included a desire for autonomy, to explore new creative and cultural practice, to progress or change their career, to develop new and existing relationships, to purchase equipment for development, to invest time/research into developing projects, knowledge and skills, to adapt to challenges posed by the pandemic, and/or reduce reliance on grant funding.
13. The vast majority of surveyed applicants reported that they understood both DYCP's eligibility criteria and purpose, with successful applicants more likely to report this. That said, there were some minor issues around understanding: some struggled identifying what would constitute a reasonable project, and some were reluctant to entirely forego outputs, public benefits and/or demonstration of value for money in their project plans. The guidance, case studies and support to applicants were all found to have supported understanding. However, interviews and survey responses point to concern amongst Museums and Libraries applicants

that DYCP appears better aligned with other disciplines. This may be partially responsible for lower applications from these disciplines.

The application process

14. The application process is intended to be proportionate, straightforward, accessible and not overly prescriptive. The vast majority of successful applicants surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied, whilst only around quarter of unsuccessful applicants were. Satisfaction was high with the application process timings. Most applicants thought the information required was reasonable and the process proportionate.
15. However, there was less agreement about the application process being straightforward to complete and knowing how to write a good application, especially amongst unsuccessful applicants. There was a common request for assessment criteria to be more explicit. A small but significant proportion reported being unsure how to develop a budget and what constitutes fair pay for themselves and others, and therefore being hesitant to fully cost their own time. Grantium was also highlighted as an issue by many.
16. DYCP and Arts Council England's *Let's Create* strategy share an ambition to support practitioners with potential early in their careers, as well as those who have never applied to the Arts Council before.¹⁰ However, interviews indicated that these practitioners were most likely to report having struggled with their application. Applicants with a professional network reported being able to draw on this for support; those without may be at a disadvantage. This suggests there may be a need for further application writing support or guidance aimed at those who are more likely to need it, if successful applications are sought from a wide range of diverse practitioners. There remains a risk that those less able or confident to communicate their ideas in a written application will be disadvantaged (or at least deterred from applying due to perceived disadvantaged).

Application support

17. Applicants were asked whether they had received support with their application, and from what source. Successful applicants were more likely to have received support than unsuccessful applicants. The survey showed this support tended to come from contacts including friends, colleagues, mentors or peers in the sector, or from sector organisations.
18. A frequent comment in interviews was that the process of writing the application was formative in itself, regardless of its success. It was often seen as an 'impetus' or 'catalyst', which had pushed applicants to identify a vision, define a set of objectives and deliverables, and think about the actions needed to achieve it. It was seen as particularly formative for

¹⁰ Monitoring data shows that 80% of DYCP applications have been from first time DYCP applicants and 70% have not applied for National Lottery Project Grants or the Emergency Response Fund, although data does not show if their DYCP application came first. It is also unknown whether DYCP applicants had applied to Arts Council England for other funding.

those who were less experienced in applying for funding, who also reported developing application writing skills. Given this, it is feasible that greater support around application writing could deliver value even if no more applications could be funded, as it may support the development of plans for enhancing creative and cultural practice and support the development of application writing skills across the sector. It could also limit the risk of bias towards those with well-developed writing skills and/or networks.

Accessibility

19. DYCP is now collecting data on whether applicants consider themselves neurodivergent. Comparing the proportion of applicants who were neurodivergent in the successful and unsuccessful survey suggests that success rates are not significantly different.
20. However, in the unsuccessful applicant survey those who said they were neurodivergent were more likely to be dissatisfied with the application process and to disagree that they knew how to write a good application. The interviews included a small number of interviewees who were neurodivergent. They reported issues with the guidance, application form and Grantium in particular, and struggled in understanding 'what DYCP was really about' and communicating ideas in their application. The interviews found that the support offer for neurodivergent applicants was not clearly known or understood, and possibly inconsistently offered to neurodivergent applicants.
21. Suggested improvements included making the support offer clearer and an automatic triggering of an Access Support offer for those who say they are neurodivergent. A further suggestion was for the Arts Council to run a consulting exercise with neurodivergent applicants or sector representatives, to explore the DYCP application form/processes, and to test any changes. Use of video or audio guidance and application forms was also suggested.

Unsuccessful applicants

22. There is currently no systematic data collection on why applicants were unsuccessful, due to the quantity of applications and limited administrative resource. Most unsuccessful applicants did not know why they were unsuccessful and did not know how they would improve a future application. There is clear demand for feedback, as well as some good reasons to provide it. However, any solution needs to be mindful of the limited staffing resource available to manage and administer any feedback process.

Types of projects funded by DYCP

23. Monitoring data shows that most projects funded received £7.5k to £10k. Applications for the larger levels of funding were more likely to be successful, suggesting that the scale of activities/ambition may be a factor in the likelihood of success. Around one in nine grantees received funding for personal access costs, ranging from £13 to £12,300.
24. For successful applications, the most common focus was R&D. Least common was international travel, with the pandemic reducing applications for this type of activity.

25. Very high proportions of grantees responding to the survey undertook research, developed existing skills or new skills, and worked with new or existing collaborators and mentors. Considerable proportions accessed training/residencies or advice, or funded workspace, studio time or equipment; around one fifth worked with communities. These types of activities were delivered by more grantees than initially planned, indicating how initial plans were often built on.
26. DYCP allowed flexibility with plans. The reasons that plans changed for grantees varied: the pandemic; work or family commitments; and changes in personal circumstances such as health issues. A total of 53% of respondents reported some change of plan activities-wise; most common was a change in international travel plans. The flexibility of DYCP was highly valued. However, some reported being uncertain whether they could deviate from their activity plan and budget, and whether permission was needed.
27. The survey showed around half of grantees used the funding to forgo the need to work, so that they could instead focus on their personal development. Grantees were able to do this by paying themselves a wage and/or through covering costs of development activities. There were however a small number of grantees who said that they had not paid themselves enough or had only covered part of their time spent on their project.

Outcomes and impacts for DYCP grantees

28. The evaluation found that the time to impact varies widely, as does the magnitude of impacts. Positive outcomes have tended to yield further positive outcomes, and many of the impacts reported were unexpected and serendipitous. The attribution of impacts solely to DYCP is challenging though; the fund does not operate in isolation from grantees' existing contacts, knowledge, skills and circumstances.
29. The survey results revealed a wide variety of impacts experienced by grantees – from self-belief to new skills, new and higher quality work, new relationships, better profile, and securing work opportunities and leadership roles. The most prevalent impacts were increased enthusiasm and confidence, which interviewees indicated were key to driving practice and careers forward and realising additional impacts. An initial boost came from the funding award itself, and the feeling of validation that provided. For some, the challenging nature of the pandemic meant this boost was particularly important and timely. Grantees reported recognising the value of development time, feeling more willing to invest in themselves, take risks, reach out to contacts and take on bigger challenges.
30. Grantees also reported a vast range of learning. Some built on existing skills, knowledge and practice, whereas others went in an entirely new direction. Some reported plans to invest in and undertake more skill development, as their DYCP project had demonstrated the value of doing so. Grantees also reported improved knowledge and skills around project management, financial management, business management and leadership. This was expected to be beneficial for future careers.

31. Grantees surveyed almost universally felt that the quality of their work had improved as a result of DYCP. Grantees reported improved recognition, visibility and reach; both within their sector and with audiences.
32. Grantees felt better equipped to secure opportunities – both new and existing. Many talked about their ‘new direction’ and ‘available paths’. Some had fully embraced these, but others were unsure which direction to turn. It is worth noting that some grantees did not want to take new practices forward following experimentation through DYCP. However, in no instance did grantees report that the experience was not worthwhile.
33. In many cases there had already been a public benefit due to new works being produced and engagement with audiences, while others expected this in the future. In addition, some grantees talked about teaching (or planning to teach) their acquired skills and knowledge to others. There were several examples of projects influencing the role grantees wanted to play in their sector, including taking on leadership roles and wanting to ‘pay it forward’. Confidence, networks, knowledge and skills were particularly important to this.
34. An interesting divide amongst grantees was on planned next steps. Some thought that their next steps should be about commercialising their practice and reducing dependency on funding; others that their next steps required additional funding. These may reflect grantees being at different stages in their journey, particularly in terms of readiness (and appetite) for commercialisation. Interestingly a lower proportion of successful applicants had applied for funding elsewhere since DYCP. However, those who had applied for other funding were more likely to have secured it than unsuccessful DYCP applicants.

Timing, sustainability and additionality of impacts

35. Positively, almost no respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had entirely ended impacts of their DYCP project, although over half reported it had limited them.
36. Grantees were also asked whether they felt they were better able to sustain a career in their sector as a result of DYCP, to which the vast majority agreed. The greater opportunities and resulting financial security reported by many grantees, as well as increased passion and confidence, were seen as key factors in the likelihood they could sustain their careers.
37. The evaluation found good levels of additionality. Most interviewed grantees said they did not expect their activities and outcomes would have occurred without the funding. This was especially true for ‘riskier’ investments. Many would not have experienced the impacts they did, some of which were substantial and transformative. Being able commit time and not worry about other commitments was key to the value added by DYCP funding. The projects were also greater than the sum of their parts – with activities working in synergy, and impacts snowballing to yield further impacts.

Funding timing, amount and duration

38. The majority of grantee survey respondents thought DYCP funding came at the right time in their career, and 84% thought the level of funding was sufficient to deliver their plans. That said, almost half indicated a preference for increasing the funding amount to maximise the impact of DYCP.¹¹
39. On balance, the evidence indicates there probably is a strong enough case for a small increase of £1-2k, noting that for most £10k would likely still be sufficient. It is worth noting that any increase to the limit would not automatically lead to everyone bidding up to the limit; 25% have bid for the maximum £10k to date. However, a higher limit would mean fewer grantees overall, may deter some less experienced applicants, and additional monitoring may be required. There may also be a risk of more innovative projects being less likely to receive higher amounts of funding. Therefore careful consideration is needed around any changes to the funding limit.
40. Most grantees were happy with the length of their project, including those who delivered a more compressed or intensive project. Those who said they would have benefitted from more time had mostly not used the full 12 months available.
41. The findings suggest the DYCP model is fundamentally working. In addition to those outlined above, other improvements suggested by grantees to maximise impact included: extending the funded time period; opportunities to connect with peers/leaders within their discipline; support with showcasing or space to share with other grantees; critical friend engagement/support post-project; networking opportunities; signposting to funding, training and resources; and follow on 'DYCP 2' funding.

Who is applying to DYCP, and who has received funding

42. *Let's Create* establishes the need for Arts Council England to support diversity within the creative and cultural workforce. DYCP guidance includes a commitment to funding a broad range of 'individuals and geographical areas',¹² and Decision Panels take these factors into account when making funding decisions.
43. DYCP supports a disproportionate number of grantees in the Midlands and North compared to the workforce, whilst DYCP receives 10% of applications from the Arts Council's 'Priority Places' and the success rate is equal to the non-Priority Places success rate of 20%.¹³ Through

¹¹ The full list of options was: (1) allow applicants to apply for more than £10k; (2) allow the activity to take place for longer or over a longer time; (3) opportunities to connect with peers and/or leaders in your discipline; and (4) opportunities for meeting/sharing with other DYCP grantees. It received responses from 700 respondents.

¹² Arts Council England. 2021. [Developing your Creative Practice: Guidance for applicants](#), p.38.

¹³ The Priority Places are 54 local authorities identified in *Let's Create* Delivery Plan 2021-2024 as "places in which our investment and engagement is too low" – see [here](#) for details.

this geographical spread, the programme is supporting the government's Levelling Up agenda, which is highlighted in the *Let's Create* Delivery Plan as an objective.

- 44.** The data collected on the personal characteristics of DYCP applicants can be compared with data captured across Arts Council England's programmes and on the national workforce. Compared to National Lottery Project Grants and the Emergency Response Fund, DYCP is similarly diverse in terms of ethnicity, but receives a higher proportion of applications from females, D/deaf or disabled applicants and LGBT applicants. DYCP funds a considerably higher proportion of D/deaf or disabled grantees (and to a lesser extent female grantees). Across DYCP and all the Arts Council's programmes, Black and minority ethnic grantees account for a relatively high proportion of grantees compared to the broader workforce.

Contribution to *Let's Create* Strategy and Delivery Plan

- 45.** The alignment with the *Let's Create* Delivery Plan is clear. Through supporting individuals, access to international travel, networks and collaboration, and through supporting grantees to develop their practice and careers in response to the pandemic, there is a clear contribution towards the themes that the Delivery Plan sets out.
- 46.** For *Let's Create* itself, the impacts demonstrate how DYCP is delivering against certain points in particular: greater innovation, development of talent, increased collaboration, access to international opportunities, more sustainable and resilient careers, supporting diversity in the workforce, and supporting progression into (or competencies for) leadership roles. These impacts are most applicable to the 'A Creative and Cultural Country' Outcome. DYCP also contributes to the other two *Let's Create* Outcomes and aligns well with Arts Council England's Investment Principles.

Conclusions and key points for consideration

- 47.** The findings indicate that the DYCP model is effective in supporting creative and cultural practitioners to develop their practice, through enabling them to build skills, confidence, knowledge and networks, and to invest in equipment and materials. Those in receipt of DYCP were grateful for the opportunities provided, and have been able to build on the impacts and seen them snowball – sometimes in directions not previously anticipated.
- 48.** The programme is seen to offer a unique opportunity for freelance practitioners. As a result of the impacts achieved, most grantees agreed that the funding had enabled a step change in (or accelerated) their career.

Elements working particularly well

- 49.** The reach of DYCP across the sector is to be praised, and the principles of potential, achieving a step change, proportionality, accessibility, diversity, flexibility and autonomy are apparent throughout the programme design and are key strengths. The limited level of staffing has been carefully thought through to ensure timeliness and quality whilst maintaining efficiency. The

knowledge and dedication of those involved in the development and delivery of DYCP are to be credited. Importantly, they have drawn on resources and expertise of colleagues throughout the Arts Council to deliver the programme and seek to ensure it works for all disciplines.

- 50.** The funding provided by DYCP enabled practitioners to develop. But the funding was not the only critical enabler; simply being selected for funding by the Arts Council proved to be a powerful motivator and confidence booster for some. DYCP can be a ‘catalyst’ through more than just its funding.
- 51.** If DYCP was not offering the funding to freelancers, it is unlikely most of the development activities would have happened, with many reporting that they could only have done so to a lesser degree or at a slower pace, if at all.

Elements with scope for improvement or refinement

- 52.** While the model is fundamentally working and proving effective in meeting its aims, there are some elements which could be considered for refinement or improvement:
- Reach across the sector is broad, but there is scope to encourage further applications from Libraries and Museums practitioners
 - Although the application process was mostly viewed positively, there are possible refinements to be made to further improve accessibility and understanding
 - The absence of feedback means the process of applying to DYCP is not as formative as it could be, and possibly has detrimental effects on the number and quality of reapplications. It also limits information for internal decision making
 - The monitoring data is good quality. However, DYCP does not capture the types of activities delivered and outcomes achieved. Capturing this via the activity form would allow Arts Council England to better understand what is funded and its short-term impacts.

Key points for consideration

- 53.** The key points suggested for consideration are presented below.

Summary of key points for consideration

Awareness raising and targeted promotion

1. Consider case study focus and coverage, and ensure the examples demonstrate the variety of activities that can be funded through DYCP.
2. If it is a priority to increase successful applications from less well represented disciplines (particularly Libraries, Museums and to a lesser extent Combined Arts) the following should be considered: the appropriateness and language of the application form and guidance; producing more case studies for these disciplines; more active engagement of these sectors. This could draw on Arts Council England teams and sector organisations.

Summary of key points for consideration

Guidance and application processes

3. Consider providing more guidance around writing an application, which might include sharing examples of successful applications, and a more intensive offer targeted at those who are (or may be) disadvantaged.
4. Consider running short satisfaction surveys for any external facing events with potential applicants. To manage resourcing demands, this might best be focused on events aimed at those from underrepresented disciplines.
5. Consider how to increase the accessibility of the DYCP application process. This might include introducing bite-sized video guidance, allowing video or audio applications, and reviewing how sufficient and prominent the support offer is for neurodivergent applicants. Co-designing and/or testing any changes or additions with practitioners with a range of identified access needs could help to ensure they are fit for purpose.
6. Consider piloting and introducing limited standardised feedback to applicants, based on tick-box recording by the Arts Council's decision panels. Consider whether it would be feasible to include feedback on different elements of the application as part of this.
7. Consider producing standalone 'common mistakes' and/or 'myth buster' factsheets.
8. Consider explicitly highlighting the success rates for previous DYCP rounds so that applicants are informed and can respond accordingly.

DYCP model

9. Ensure there is clarity around permitted divergence from activity plans and budgets, including by giving more prominence to the requirements to secure approval from the Arts Council for changes to project plans.
10. Consider increasing the individual grant limit to £12k alongside the merits/demerits of a further increase. Keep the funding amount under review, subject to the overall funding allocation for DYCP.
11. Consider the desirability and feasibility of the following suggestions for improvements made by grantees, and consider testing the value (and resource requirements) of any changes planned by conducting small-scale pilots:
 - An increase to the time limit
 - Opportunities to connect with peers
 - Contact and support from the Arts Council during projects
 - Support with showcasing
 - Follow-up support/engagement
 - Follow-on funding opportunities/signposting.

Monitoring data

12. Continue to monitor applicant data on neurodivergence and whether there are any observable differences in experiences of applying to DYCP.
13. Consider capturing information on role types within the application form, perhaps using the categories defined for this evaluation.

Summary of key points for consideration

14. Consider capturing details on practitioner length of experience in the DYCP application form, with clear guidance as to how to define 'length of experience'.

15. Monitor whether the new advice framework is leading to increased uptake of DYCP amongst underrepresented groups, and consider how it can be used in order to better promote DYCP to these groups in particular.

16. Consider the inclusion of activity categories in application and activity forms to capture more detailed insights on the types of activities planned and undertaken, which will help to demonstrate how DYCP is contributing towards *Let's Create*. The survey categories may be appropriate; before categories are used it will be important to reflect on their comprehensiveness and clarity.

17. Consider the inclusion of outcome categories within the activity form to capture more detailed insights on the types of outcomes DYCP is enabling, which will help to demonstrate how DYCP is contributing towards *Let's Create*. If the survey categories are to be used, then beforehand it will be important to reflect on their comprehensiveness and clarity, and the preferred format.