



COVID-19 PUP FOR ARTISTS AND ARTS WORKERS

Since the closure of the arts sector, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) has been a critical lifeline for artists and arts workers. The scheme has been welcomed by NCFA, however with social distancing and other measures likely to remain for some time to come, a number of issues must now be addressed.

- ➔ While NCFA welcomes the recent extension of the PUP, the tiered reduction of the PUP payment will have a disproportionate impact on freelance artists and arts workers. **More than 68% of NCFA membership currently availing of the PUP will have their payment reduced by September 17th***.
- ➔ Ireland already has one of the highest costs of living in Europe. Forcing skilled artists and arts workers to live on as little as €203 per week while the industry is closed down, through no fault of their own, will cause permanent damage to the cultural landscape of Ireland. This will lead to a significant talent drain and it may take years to recover.
- ➔ The arts sector is unlikely to return to sustainable levels of work by April 2021 - the proposed end of the PUP scheme. We call on the government to consider what will happen to artists and arts workers at that point. NCFA is ready to work with Government to identify meaningful interventions that will address a prolonged closure of the industry.
- ➔ Many artists and arts workers are still not able to access the PUP, including those who were on Jobseeker's at the outset of the pandemic, those who have been availing of Maternity Benefit, and those over the age of 66, who do not have private pensions, or may not have qualified for the contributory state pension, and rely on employment income solely.

The future of Irish arts is at stake. Investment in the sector, in the form of funding and grants, is hugely welcomed. However, it is imperative to also protect the most vulnerable part of the arts ecosystem: the individual artist and freelance arts worker. These individuals form the backbone of the arts sector and, according to a recent study, 89% of them are living in financial uncertainty*.

The arts, through books, music, film, and TV, provided respite and escape during lockdown. It has never been clearer that we will all lose out when artists can no longer produce their work, or when there is creative flight from Ireland.

The proposed changes to the PUP do not recognise the unique and precarious nature of the employment conditions of many freelance artists and arts workers. We hope that this document will be useful in clarifying some critical issues, while also highlighting potential solutions. We are ready to work with Government on this important matter.

CONTEXT

Our artists and arts workers make Ireland a vibrant and exciting place to live. However, it must be noted that the arts sector is a vocational sector where highly trained workers pursue poorly paid careers. They contribute much to society, often with little in return. Our artists and arts workers are proud to represent our country, both at home and internationally, with world-class performance and creativity. However, it is unjust that these same skilled workers are living in such uncertainty, with many even living below the poverty line**. This was the case before this pandemic hit, and COVID-19 has only served to exacerbate this instability further.

ISSUE #1: Blended Income

Many artists and arts workers, often earning less than the national minimum wage, make their living through a combination of self-employed income (including artist exempt income) AND PAYE income. This is often through no choice of their own; it is driven by the nature of the work and/or Revenue's rules.

Welfare have indicated that *"they cannot combine PAYE and Self Employed income for consideration in calculating Pandemic Unemployment Payments"*.

This is extremely unfair to artists and arts workers who rely on income from both sources to survive, and who earn more than €200 a week on average from a blend of self-employed and PAYE income.

ISSUE #2: Income Assessment

As indicated above, many artists and arts workers make their living through a combination of self-employed income and PAYE income, often through no choice of their own.

Welfare have indicated that *"Under PUP rating rules....self-employed incomes can only be examined in respect of the 2018 year, but ONLY in circumstances where individuals were not employed in either 2019 or 2020."*

Once again, this is extremely unfair to artists and arts workers as a small amount of PAYE income in 2019 is automatically taken as the basis of the calculation rather than the often more substantial 2018 self-employed income.

In addition, Welfare's responses to appeals based on the above has been inconsistent with most individuals having their appeal rejected, but a small number of individuals having their rate increased.

ISSUE #3: Income Fluctuations

Many artists' and arts workers' income fluctuates from year to year. Consider a writer who might write a book over a couple of years, or an actor/dancer who has a particularly good year followed by a more fallow period. This was the case before the pandemic and has been further exacerbated by the collapsing of trades in 2020.

The Solution

A Total Income approach (including self-employed and PAYE) would be a much fairer way to calculate artists and arts workers income.

If the rule were worded as follows:
Under PUP rating rules, employed and self-employed income can be combined.

The Solution

Welfare confirm that it is now policy that it is possible to exclude PAYE income in 2019 or 2020 where the rate based on the individual's self-employed income in 2019 or 2018 gives a higher weekly average.

Note: the above method of calculation has already been used by Welfare in a small number of cases and successful appeals based on the above method being communicated back to individuals by email.

The Solution

Income averaging is available to farmers but not to artists. Introducing income averaging for artists and arts workers, over three years starting from 2018, would assist greatly to counter the effects of artists' and arts workers' precarious work patterns.

ISSUE #4: Short Employment

As the economy opens back up, and as increased investment in the arts makes its way into the system, short term periods of work will become available to artists and arts workers. This, by no means, will be the recommencement of these artists' or arts workers' trades, as mass gatherings will still be prohibitively regulated under government guidelines and such work will be occasional at best. There is a lack of clarity over whether artists or arts workers can come off the PUP for these short term periods of activity and then access the PUP again.

There is a further lack of clarity around small ad-hoc payments with some PUP recipients being advised by Welfare over the phone (to) not worry about small payments as it is evident that their trade has still collapsed.

Finally, it is not clear if closing the scheme to new applicants on 17 September 2020 will include applications from individuals who were previously on the scheme, but who have come off it for a short period of work.

ISSUE #5: Stuck on Jobseeker's

Prior to Covid-19, some artists and arts workers relied on Jobseekers from time to time due to the precarious nature of their work. As festivals and other arts related activity tends to happen in the summer months, this might be more noticeable in January and February. Some of these artists and arts workers remained on Jobseekers rather than being allowed to access the PUP. This is despite the fact that many had work booked for later in the year which was cancelled due to Covid-19.

ISSUE #6: Older Art Workers

Many artists do not have private pensions and continue to work into older age. These individuals currently do not qualify for the PUP because they are over 66. Some do not even qualify for a state pension. We believe this is discriminatory. These artists are particularly vulnerable and should be valued and supported following a lifetime of work.

The Solution

1. Confirmation from the DEASP that individuals can close their PUP payment for a specific period to work on a gig and be assured they can access it when their trade ceases again.
2. Confirmation from the DEASP that a PUP recipient can inform the Department of smaller payments and not be ineligible for the PUP as it is clear that their trade has still collapsed.
3. Confirmation from the DEASP that the restriction on new applications does not include those from individuals who received the PUP previous to 17 September 2020.

The Solution

Confirmation that all artists and arts workers can sign on to the PUP at this point given that their trade has collapsed completely due to COVID.

The Solution

Adjustment of the terms of the PUP to allow older artists who have continued in employment beyond the age of 66, and who are not in receipt of a private pension.

ISSUE #7: What Next?

Should the PUP become unavailable to an artist or arts worker for any reason, and with the closure of the scheme in April 2021, we are concerned that many who are still not in a position to recommence work will be left adrift. A large number of artists and arts workers do not qualify for regular welfare supports, including Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit, for various reasons. These include: living with parents, living with a salaried partner, not having enough PRSI stamps etc. Those who were covered by the PUP may not be able to receive normal welfare benefits if and when the PUP ceases.

The Solution

1. Continue the PUP until mass gatherings are permitted again and cultural events can take place to full capacity.
2. Use the basis of the PUP Scheme to begin trials for Universal Basic Income. NCFA welcomes the government's openness to this model as set out in the Programme for Government. We believe that the arts and culture sector is a prime sector to trial UBI as a highly-skilled vocational sector who are currently critically undervalued. The PUP has provided a model for how UBI could be rolled out. This would make an enormous difference to the lives of many artists and arts workers, and their families, and would take significant pressure off the Arts Council and social welfare services.

*NCFA membership survey, July 30 2020

**Theatre Forum [Payscales Survey](#), 2018.

