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## Clore Leadership-AHRC Online Research Library Paper *A Silenced Epidemic: Burnout in the Cultural Sector; and How We Can Create a Better Future*

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### **A note on contents:**

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## 1.0 Introduction

This report presents findings from a Clore and Arts and Humanities Council-funded research project into burnout in the cultural sector. It explores how those working in the sector define burnout; factors that cause burnout; and impacts of burnout on people and organisations, before putting forward recommendations for future practice that can prevent and reduce burnout amongst cultural sector workers.

## 1.1 Research Inspiration

From September 2023 to March 2024, I was privileged to undertake a Clore Cultural Fellowship. As part of the Fellowship, I conducted research into how leaders can create positive work cultures that enable staff and organisations to thrive. This was particularly inspired by Nisbett, Walmsley and McDowell's research<sup>1</sup> into abusive leadership in the arts, as well as anecdotal evidence of the impacts of poor and toxic workplace cultures in the sector.

One of the manifestations of toxic organisational cultures is the prevalence of burnout, with leaders and staff feeling the impacts of factors including crisis management, bullying, long hours, and pressure to deliver beyond capacity. When burnout manifests, it can impact negatively on people and organisations (e.g. Edú-Valsania, Laguía and Moriano<sup>2</sup>; Chowdhury<sup>3</sup>) - for example, organisations may experience conflict and poor morale and productivity. Burnout can also prevent the creative and innovative thinking which is crucial for finding solutions to complex issues and crises (e.g. Bader<sup>4</sup>).

The research I conducted during the Fellowship suggested burnout has become more prevalent in recent years as the sector faces polycrisis, with challenges

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<sup>1</sup> Nisbett, M., Walmsley, B. and McDowell, E. "Bullying bosses, broken boards and a crisis of accountability" *Arts Professional*, 23 February 2023, accessed 24 February 2023, <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/bullying-bosses-broken-boards-and-crisis-accountability?no=cache>

<sup>2</sup> Edú-Valsania, S., Laguía, A. and Moriano, J.A. "Burnout: A Review of Theory and Measurement", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 19(3): 1780. (2022), accessed 2 April 2024, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8834764/>

<sup>3</sup> Chowdhury, R.A. "Burnout and its Organizational Effects: A Study on Literature Review", *Journal of Business & Financial Affairs*. 07(04). (2018), accessed 2 April 2024, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330338619\\_Burnout\\_and\\_its\\_Organizational\\_Effects\\_A\\_Study\\_on\\_Literature\\_Review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330338619_Burnout_and_its_Organizational_Effects_A_Study_on_Literature_Review)

<sup>4</sup> Bader, N. "Why we Need Creativity to Tackle the Climate Crisis" *Medium* (blog), 4 November 2023, accessed 2 April 2024, <https://medium.com/@ninabader/why-we-need-creativity-to-tackle-the-climate-crisis-f538b307f455>

including the impacts of Covid-19, cost of living crisis, loss and lack of funding, and the climate emergency. This led me to wonder about leadership in the polycrisis; how this might be impacting on levels of burnout; and how leaders can create organisational cultures which nourish staff, prevent burnout, and give space for reflection and solutions-focused thinking so the sector can better respond to the challenges it is facing.

My interest in burnout is also driven by personal experiences. At times, burnout has led to me developing anxiety, low mood, and physical health issues; and has negatively affected my confidence and self-esteem. Although I did not always characterise these experiences in the moment as burnout, I recognise the slow build-up of symptoms and normalisation of feeling exhausted and low, followed by collapse, as described by many of the people I spoke to during this research.

Throughout the research process, I did not want to impose my experience of burnout on others; and aimed to provide safe, open spaces in which people felt able to share their experiences with me. None of the experiences shared in this report are mine, but some of them felt very familiar to me. I am sure many will feel familiar to readers, too.

I have included many direct quotes throughout the report, as I felt it essential that people who participated in the research were given a voice to share experiences in their own words. Their statements and experiences are incredibly powerful and testament to the widespread issue of burnout in the sector – and the devastating impacts of burnout on workers and organisations.

## 1.2 Research Focus

My research aimed to understand how cultural leaders - including leaders of organisations, line managers, and trustees – and wider sector support organisations and funders, can create organisational cultures that prevent or decrease burnout and enable people and organisations to thrive.

Previous sector research, including Clore's 'World of Work'<sup>5</sup> and Arts Council England's Cultural Freelancers Study 2024<sup>6</sup>, provide compelling evidence of the existence of burnout in the cultural sector, along with other issues affecting

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<sup>5</sup> Clore Leadership and Metro Dynamics, *Cultural Leadership in a Changing World of Work: Research Paper* (Clore Leadership and Metro Dynamics, June 2024), accessed 1 September 2024, <https://www.cloreleadership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/World-of-Work-Metro-Dynamics-Full-Research-Report-with-Cover.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> University of Essex and Arts Council England, *Cultural Freelancers Study 2024*, (University of Essex and Arts Council England, 2024), accessed 1 December 2024, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/supporting-individual-creative-and-cultural-practitioners/creative-and-cultural-freelancers-study>

cultural sector workers. My research sits alongside and helps build on previous studies by specifically focusing on burnout in the sector.

The research aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What factors contribute to burnout amongst leaders and staff in the cultural sector?
2. What are the effects of burnout on leaders and staff?
3. What does an anti-burnout work culture look like?
4. What are the factors that contribute to an anti-burnout work culture?
5. What can be done in practice to create cultures that prevent or decrease burnout?

### 1.3 Structure of the Report

The report is divided into five sections:

1. **Introduction:** An outline of the research aims and broad context of the research.
2. **Research Methods:** The methodology I used to conduct the research.
3. **Burnout in the Cultural Sector: Context Setting:** A short literature review to set the research in context.
4. **Findings and Analysis:** The research findings and related discussion.
5. **Reflections and Recommendations:** Recommendations for preventing and decreasing burnout and my personal reflections on the research.

The report is around 17,000 words to give space for a deeper dive into the research topic and to summarise data from 193 interviews and survey responses. I hope it provides useful evidence of the burnout crisis and provokes reflection and action.

Many of us will know the feeling of an increasing reading list, with no time to do the actual reading, and the feelings of guilt and pressure that can stem from this. Use the report as you need; if you have five minutes to spare, you might want to skip to the recommendations, for example. Do what you need to do to make the act of reading as comfortable as possible. To support accessibility, I have also created a five-episode podcast – *Burnout in the Arts* – and anti-burnout toolkit to accompany this research report<sup>7</sup>.

Some of the research findings you encounter may be difficult to read, perhaps especially if you have experienced, or are experiencing, burnout. Please take your time, take care of yourself, and read the content that is helpful for you. If

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<sup>7</sup>The podcast can be found on all podcast platforms. The toolkit can be found on the Clore Leadership website and CultureBloom website.

you need it, the Mind UK website offers helpful information about mental health support<sup>8</sup>.

## 1.4 Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without people coming forward to take part in interviews or responding to an online survey. I recognise the emotional work required from those who participated in the research to share sensitive and, at times, deeply painful lived experiences of burnout, its causes, and its consequences. Research confidentiality means I cannot share more specific examples of people's experiences; however, I hope the summaries I provide, including quotes, demonstrate the crisis that is burnout in the cultural sector and the importance of taking action to reverse this and create a positive, nourishing sector for those who work in it.

## 2.0 Research Methods

Burnout in the cultural sector is a complex issue; many factors can impact on burnout and on creating nourishing, anti-burnout cultures. To adequately investigate these complexities, my research took a qualitative approach, collecting data around lived experiences of those working across the cultural sector via interviews and an online survey, and bringing this together with comprehensive desk-based research to answer my research questions.

The interviews and online survey explored:

- How people describe burnout
- Factors that cause burnout
- Impacts of burnout
- What, if anything, organisations and the wider sector could do to reduce and prevent burnout
- Any other comments relating to burnout in the cultural sector

## 2.1 Widening the Research

While I initially intended to solely explore leaders' experiences of burnout, I also came to explore the experiences of those in non-leadership positions. Firstly, the literature around burnout demonstrates burnout is a systemic issue that affects people across organisations, and secondly, I was contacted by several people in

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<sup>8</sup> Mind, "How to seek help for a mental health problem", *Mind*, accessed 3 January 2025, <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/seeking-help-for-a-mental-health-problem/where-to-start/>

non-leadership positions who had been through very negative experiences and wanted to share their stories. It felt important to give voice to those not currently in leadership positions, as well as leaders, as solutions to burnout must support everyone and tackle the issue systemically. In addition, those in earlier career roles will be the leaders of the future; it feels crucial they are able to contribute to this research so they, together with current leaders, can help shape a better future for the sector.

## 2.2 Desk-Based Research

I began the research project by conducting desk-based research to explore factors that contribute to burnout, impacts of burnout, and factors that create anti-burnout work cultures. I used findings from the literature to generate emerging themes, which I used to craft survey and interview questions. Once I had conducted interviews and the survey, I went back to the literature to help reflect on and analyse my findings.

## 2.3 Interviews

I originally intended to carry out semi-structured interviews with 10-15 cultural sector leaders across disciplines and working in a range of organisations. However, after an open call for interviewees resulted in increased visibility for the project and appetite to participate in the research, I conducted 28 interviews. These represented the following principle artforms: Visual Arts; Community Arts; Museums and Heritage; Combined Arts; Music; and Theatre<sup>9</sup>.

Interviewees were recruited through LinkedIn, BlueSky, and professional networks, and were self-selecting. Initially, the research was going to focus on the experiences of those who self-describe as leaders<sup>10</sup> - including those leading organisations and teams, and freelance sector experts and leaders; however, this was expanded to any cultural sector worker after enquiries demonstrated appetite from others to share their experiences; in total, four interviewees were not in leadership positions. Widening the scope of the research gave voice to those experiencing burnout who are not in traditional 'leadership' roles and has demonstrated that burnout is widespread across the sector, a crisis that is affecting people across organisations.

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<sup>9</sup> The online survey enabled me to collect data from people representing more wide-ranging artforms.

<sup>10</sup> I acknowledge that leadership can be demonstrated by people across traditional work hierarchies. However, 'leaders', as described here, is more likely to relate to those in traditional positions of power, such as team leaders, Directors, and CEOs.

## 2.4 Online Survey

I conducted an online survey to gather more data and further explore issues raised in the interviews. In total, 165 people completed the survey, 70% of whom were in leadership and/or managerial positions when they experienced burnout<sup>11</sup>:

- **Leadership and management roles:** Manager 30%; Senior Manager/Director – 19%; CEO 16%; Artistic Director 5%
- **Other roles:** Artist, Curator, 19%; Producer – 13%; Coordinator/Officer 13%; Administrator 11%; Other non-management roles: 21%
- **Freelance roles:** Freelance 11%; Consultant 10%; Independent Artist 3%

Of those who had experienced burnout, 83% were in full-time roles, 22% in part-time roles, 14% were self-employed, and 12% had temporary contracts.

Around 50% of participants experienced burnout in the museums sector – this is probably due to my networks largely being in the museums sector. However, a number of sectors were represented: Theatre, Visual Arts, Heritage, Combined Arts, Dance, Archives, Music, Cultural Education, Cultural Policy, Cultural Research, Libraries, Galleries, Digital Media, Film/TV, and Literature. The research found people working in different sectors had very similar experiences of burnout; there were no significant differences between the causes or impacts of burnout across sectors.

It should be noted that 13% of survey respondents live and work outside the UK. The research found no significant differences between experiences of burnout amongst UK and international cultural sector workers; this is a worldwide issue. There is potential for UK and international cultural sector workers and organisations to collaborate, coming together to discuss and find solutions to the burnout crisis.

The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey. It was promoted through my networks, networks on LinkedIn and BlueSky, and via Professor Ben Walmsley's networks.

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<sup>11</sup> Respondents were asked to note the role(s) they had been in when they experienced burnout, and many gave more than one response, which is why the data adds up to more than 100%.

### 3.0 Burnout in the Cultural Sector: Context Setting

This section takes a brief look at literature relating to burnout, including burnout in the cultural sector.

#### 3.1 The Cultural Sector and The Polycrisis

Clore's Imagine it Different report notes that demands on leader have grown worse in the past five years, with leaders feeling "under-siege and overwhelmed".<sup>12</sup>

Leaders and organisations are facing significant challenges<sup>13</sup>, including:

- Financial cuts and loss of and lack of funding; including the long-term impacts of austerity that area still being felt by organisations<sup>14</sup>
- The high cost of living
- A competitive funding landscape
- The long effects of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Climate emergency
- Culture Wars

In the context of leaders battling multiple, systemic crises, working to secure the survival of organisations, and supporting staff, burnout seems to be almost a certainty.

#### 3.2 Burnout

'Burnout' is not a new issue; indeed, the construct of 'burnout' was introduced in the 1970s<sup>15</sup>, firstly in relation to social professionals and, later, in any professional in which people experience stress and overwork<sup>16</sup>. However, it is, perhaps, increasingly highlighted and discussed, and is clearly impacting people working in multiple professions; this is not simply a cultural sector issue. Research in 2023 by the TUC, for example, of more than 2,000 working people

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<sup>12</sup> Clore Leadership and Metro Dynamics, *Cultural Leadership in a Changing World of Work: Research Paper*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Clore Leadership and Metro Dynamics, *Cultural Leadership in a Changing World of Work: Research Paper*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> Clore Leadership and Metro Dynamics, *Cultural Leadership in a Changing World of Work: Research Paper*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Bianchi, R. and Schonfield, I. S, "Beliefs about Burnout" *Work & Stress* (2) 2020, 116-34, accessed 1 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2024.2364590>, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Hillert, A., Albrecht, A. and Voderholzer, U, "The Burnout Phenomemon: A Resume After More Than 15,000 Scientific Publications" *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, (11) 2020, accessed 1 May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2024.2364590>  
[10.3389/fpsy.2020.519237](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.519237)

in England and Wales, found more than half of workers said work had become intense and demanding, 61% of working people felt exhausted at the end of the working day, and respondents felt the situation was getting worse, in part due to spending more time outside of working hours undertaking tasks such as sending emails<sup>17</sup>.

Mental Health UK's second Annual Burnout report (2025) surveyed 4,418 UK adults in partnership with YouGov. The research found burnout is prevalent in the UK, with 34% of adults experiencing high or extreme levels of pressure or stress 'always' or 'often' and 91% experiencing high pressure or stress at some point over the previous year.<sup>18</sup> A key finding was a generational divide relating to burnout, with 18-24 year olds most likely to be absent due to poor mental health caused by stress and three times more likely to need time off due to worsening health caused by NHS waiting times than those aged 55+<sup>19</sup>; people in this age group were most likely to report having to regularly work unpaid overtime, take on additional hours due to the increased cost of living, and feeling isolated at work<sup>20</sup>. The research also found a potential culture of silence around stress, as some of those impacted by stress were not adjusting their hours, taking time off, and/or not disclosing the level of stress they were experiencing<sup>21</sup>. Impacts of stress were reported as sleep issues, diet, impacts on self-confidence, and negative impacts on personal relationships<sup>22</sup>.

Burnout negatively impacts on individuals and organisations. Gallup's 2024 *State of the Global Workplace* report found burnout and related causes led to global employee engagement declining to 21% in 2024 and that only 33% of employees are thriving overall<sup>23</sup>. Manager engagement was found to be particularly poor due to increasing demand and expectations, which began in the pandemic<sup>24</sup>. While the Gallup research is international and cross-sector, impacts on engagement will be familiar to those working in the cultural sector, including rapidly restructured teams and departments, shrinking budgets, disrupted by

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<sup>17</sup> Duggan, E, "People at increased risk of burnout due to more demanding workdays, TUC says". *The Guardian*, 23 July 2023, accessed 30 September 2024  
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jul/23/people-at-increased-risk-of-burnout-due-to-more-demanding-workdays-tuc-says>

<sup>18</sup> Mental Health UK, "Burnout Report 2025 reveals generational divide in levels of stress and work absence", *Mental Health UK*, 16 January 2025, accessed 18 January 2025  
<https://mentalhealth-uk.org/blog/burnout-report-2025-reveals-generational-divide-in-levels-of-stress-and-work-absence/>

<sup>19</sup> Mental Health UK, Burnout Report 2025 reveals generational divide in levels of stress and work absence

<sup>20</sup> Mental Health UK, Burnout Report 2025 reveals generational divide in levels of stress and work absence

<sup>21</sup> Mental Health UK, Burnout Report 2025 reveals generational divide in levels of stress and work absence

<sup>22</sup> Mental Health UK, Burnout Report 2025 reveals generational divide in levels of stress and work absence

<sup>23</sup> Gallup, *State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report*, (Gallup, 2025), accessed 16 May 2025, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> Gallup, *State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report*, 5

supply chains, new customer expectations, digital transformation<sup>25</sup>. The report acknowledges individual burnout also has implications for organisations, including decreased performance, increased absenteeism<sup>26</sup>.

In the UK, the financial cost of workplace sickness is more than £100billion a year due to lower productivity and the cost of sick days<sup>27</sup>. Globally, around \$1 trillion is lost in productivity globally each year due to work-related stress<sup>28</sup>. The enormously high cost of burnout for individuals and organisations points to an ethical and business case for preventing and decreasing burnout; working in ways that mean workers are supported and cared for, that support organisational resilience through greater morale, collaboration, innovation, and productivity.

Wiens discusses the normalisation of burnout<sup>29</sup>, noting the number of people experiencing burnout is higher and having more debilitating effects than ever before, and citing impacts including mental and physical health issues, absenteeism, job dissatisfaction, underperformance, and burned out workers being more likely to make errors and less likely to be innovative and productive. Wiens notes that burnout can “sneak up on us so gradually we don’t realise we’ve entered a danger zone until we get sick, our motivation vanishes, or our performance plummets”<sup>30</sup>, and that this is being mirrored in wider society, with burnout slowly becoming the norm in our working lives.

Importantly, Moss<sup>31</sup> notes that burnout can be perceived as primarily an individual issue that can be rectified with ‘self-help’, such as saying no and breathing techniques, but, in reality, personal actions are like sticking plasters over workplace cultures that cause burnout<sup>32</sup>; Moss calls on leaders to create burnout strategies to manage burnout in organisations.

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<sup>25</sup> Gallup, *State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report*, 6

<sup>26</sup> Gallup, *State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report*, 10

<sup>27</sup> Gregory, A, “Hidden cost of UK workplace sickness rockets to £100bn a year, report finds”, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2024, accessed 15 April 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jul/31/hidden-cost-of-uk-workplace-sickness-rockets-to-100bn-a-year-report-finds>

<sup>28</sup> Gallup, *State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report*, 3

<sup>29</sup> Wiens, K, “How Burnout Became Normal – and How to Push Back Against it” *Harvard Business Review*, 23 April 2024, accessed 3 February 2025, <https://hbr.org/2024/04/how-burnout-became-normal-and-how-to-push-back-against-it>

<sup>30</sup> Wiens, K, “How Burnout Became Normal – and How to Push Back Against it”

<sup>31</sup> Moss, J, “Burnout Is About Your Workplace, Not Your People”, *Harvard Business Review*, 11 December 2019, accessed 3 February 2025, <https://egn.com/dk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/08/Burnout-is-about-your-workplace-not-your-people-1.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Moss, J, “Burnout Is About Your Workplace, Not Your People”

### 3.3 Burnout in the Cultural Sector

Research presented in 3.2 demonstrates burnout is wider societal issue, and not solely present in the cultural sector. However, sector-specific research shows burnout is prevalent in culture and the arts in the UK and internationally. Clore's World of Work Metro Dynamics paper discusses challenges related to mental health and wellbeing<sup>33</sup>, while Power's 2024 article for The Conversation<sup>34</sup> suggests, burnout in the arts has increased since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and that "burnout rates are higher in not-for-profit organisations...due to insufficient resources, job insecurity, low pay and disillusionment in meeting funders' rising demands."<sup>35</sup>

Walmsley et al's 2022 research<sup>36</sup> into the impacts of the pandemic on the cultural industries makes for particularly sobering reading; the pandemic had a profound impact on the workforce, including feelings of isolation, financial pain, and overwork - leading, in some cases, to poor mental health<sup>37</sup>; and found those more likely to leave the sector were women, people who experience racism, disabled individuals, and those without higher education qualifications, suggesting systemic inequalities shaped the impact of the pandemic<sup>38</sup>. Interviews conducted by the research team discovered burnout was prevalent in summer and autumn 2021, and later in 2021 as workers dealt with the effects of the pandemic<sup>39</sup>. Significantly, the research makes clear that the pandemic "aggravated and accelerated existing inequalities and longer-term trends across the arts and cultural sector"<sup>40</sup>; the pandemic contributed, and deepened, issues leading to crisis in the sector, including burnout, but those issues were present beforehand. This bears out in Hoyle et al's 2018 research into leadership in the

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<sup>33</sup> Clore Leadership and Metro Dynamics, *Cultural Leadership in a Changing World of Work: Research Paper*

<sup>34</sup> Power, K, "Caring as much as you do was killing you'. We need to talk about burnout in the arts", *The Conversation*, 8 January 2024, accessed 10 April 2025, <https://theconversation.com/caring-as-much-as-you-do-was-killing-you-we-need-to-talk-about-burnout-in-the-arts-215883>

<sup>35</sup> Power, K, "Caring as much as you do was killing you'. We need to talk about burnout in the arts"

<sup>36</sup> Walmsley, B., Gilmore, A., O'Brien, D and Torreggiani, *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here*, (Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value, 2022), accessed 1 September 2024, [https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Culture\\_in\\_Crisis.pdf](https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Culture_in_Crisis.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Walmsley, B. et al, *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here*

<sup>38</sup> Walmsley, B. et al, *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here*, 41

<sup>39</sup> Walmsley, B. et al, *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here*, 42

<sup>40</sup> Walmsley, B. et al, *Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here*, 4

arts<sup>41</sup>, commissioned by Arts Council England, which found leaders were under increasing pressure, with growing expectations placed on them, that skills in people management in the sector were lacking, with bullying and harassment being prevalent in some organisations<sup>42</sup>, and that there was an increasingly high risk of burnout amongst sector leaders<sup>43</sup>.

Burnout has been a long-term issue in the cultural sector, exacerbated by the pandemic, and now, it seems, is worse than ever before.

## 4.0 Findings and Analysis

This section sets out the findings of the research, together with analysis of the issues. Anonymous quotes from research are used to illustrate points. Quotes contain no descriptive indicators to protect the anonymity of individuals who participated in the research.

### 4.1 Summary

Burnout in the cultural sector is a crisis, affecting individuals working at all levels of organisations, and impacting on organisational health and resilience.

It is a complex issue, caused by multiple factors:

- **Systemic factors**, such as lack of or loss of funding, structural inequalities and discrimination, the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and high cost of living.
- **The wider sector**, for example, funder requirements and expectations, a perceived lack of support from funders and sector support organisations, and high competition for funding.
- **Organisational factors**, including poor governance and people management skills, a lack of strong visions, missions and strategies, and problematic organisational practices.
- **Individual factors**, such as overwork caused by feeling passionate about the work and the sector and feeling a duty to support the sector.

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<sup>41</sup> Hoyle, S. et al, *Changing Cultures: Transforming leadership in the arts, museums and libraries*, (London: King's College London and Arts Council England, 2018), accessed 1 September 2024 [https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Changing%20Cultures\\_0.pdf](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Changing%20Cultures_0.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Hoyle, S. et al, *Changing Cultures: Transforming leadership in the arts, museums and libraries*, 13

<sup>43</sup> Hoyle, S. et al, *Changing Cultures: Transforming leadership in the arts, museums and libraries*, 15

Crucially, some of these issues are interlinked. For example:

- Losing a member of staff and deciding not to fill – or lacking the money to be able to fill - the vacant roles for financial reasons might be linked to a lack of or loss funding that means financial savings are necessary.
- A lack of prioritisation and strategic working might be caused by poor governance or financial difficulties that mean feeling under pressure to overpromise and overdeliver to gain funding.

It is important to note the complex difficulties faced by trustees and leaders of cultural organisations and view issues through a compassionate lens, acknowledging leaders cannot be held responsible for entirely eradicating embedded systemic issues; and that leaders are experiencing catastrophic burnout that is affecting their health, personal and work lives. At a time the sector needs energy, fresh-thinking, and innovation to deal – as much as possible - with the effects of the polycrisis, the burnout epidemic is depleting and actively harming leaders, making them less able to find solutions.

However, it is clear some organisational practices – that can be changed - are exacerbating systemic issues and causing burnout for leaders and staff at all levels of organisations, as well as freelancers.

If we are to put an end to burnout, it will take active effort from the whole sector. Funders, policymakers and sector support organisations must put in place practices that protect organisations and individuals, as much as possible, from wider systemic issues; trustees must support, listen to, and protect leaders from burnout through, for example, creating strong strategies, providing exemplary governance, and enabling leaders to discuss burnout and find solutions to this; and leaders and managers must implement anti-burnout organisational practices and behaviours to help protect their staff from burnout. This will also require a shift away from the idea that individuals alone are responsible for – and have ultimate power over – their levels of burnout; this is not an individual problem, it is a sector problem.

## 4.2 Definitions of Burnout: What Burnout Means to People

The 11<sup>th</sup> Revision of the International Classification of Diseases describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon; not a medical condition. It is defined as, "*...a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by three dimensions:*

- *feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;*
- *increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and*

- *reduced professional efficacy.*

*Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.”<sup>44</sup>*

My research found evidence of the three dimensions of burnout amongst participants. When asked to describe what burnout meant to them, ‘exhaustion’ was one of the top responses. Some participants noted burnout had led to them feeling cynical about their job and/or the sector, which, in some cases, had led to them leaving their role or the sector, or going freelance and opting out of working for organisations. In addition, responses show burnout can lead to people feeling like they have personally failed or that they are ‘not good enough’, which can cause long-term feelings of inadequacy and a loss of confidence and self-esteem.

However, official definitions of burnout perhaps do not demonstrate the nuance of how burnout looks and is felt by people working in the cultural sector. Responses to my research show burnout affects individuals in a number of ways, including physical and mental health issues, loss of confidence, and exhaustion. People reported symptoms of depression, including tiredness, loss of motivation, and loss of joy in life.

*“You are full and there is no room for anything to go wrong and...there is a risk you’ll unravel and never be knitted back together again.”*

*“It feels like complete creative block and the inability to come up with any ideas. Also the inability to focus, extreme distractibility, a feeling of heaviness and that everything seems like a slog and really hard. A feeling of hopelessness and uselessness.”*

*“Loss of belief in the sector’s ability to offer happy working experiences. Loss of ambition for the future.”*

*“The general feeling of being run over by a truck after hitting a wall at 200 km an hour - life has no meaning or value beyond laying in bed in a fetal position with no desire to get out except for an occasional pee and cup of coffee.”*

Many participants commented that burnout had ‘crept up’ on them; they had only realised how exhausted and unwell they felt once they were at the point of collapse. This raises the question of whether people working in the sector need to be better informed of the signs of burnout and whether organisations, and sector support organisations, need to do more to monitor staff burnout and intervene if a member of staff is becoming burnt out.

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<sup>44</sup> World Health Organisation, “Burn-out an “occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases”, *World Health Organisation*, 28 May 2019, accessed 3 April 2024, <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

*"I hadn't realised how near to this point I'd got. Near to the point I couldn't come to work the next morning because I was so exhausted."*

*"Something that builds up over time, in a way you might not even notice it, until the symptoms/impact becomes completely unmanageable all of a sudden."*

*"It creeps up over years, each day losing a bit more of yourself to stress, until one day you reach the tipping point, the cliff edge, - and one final event tips you right over the edge and you shatter into pieces. Healing takes years and you move forward with what is left, taking it day by day."*

*"It's the gradual realisation that the rest of life has been passing you by and you've been swallowed whole by your work. To me it felt like desperation without reprieve."*

The cultural sector should be in no doubt that this is what it is currently presiding over. If no action is taken, there will be consequences for people and organisations, including people leaving the sector, staff developing mental and physical health issues; and less resilient organisations, with unmotivated, unfocused staff, and affected by staff needing to take weeks or months of sick leave.

### 4.3 Factors that Cause Burnout

Burnout is sometimes viewed largely being a personal issue; we are told we need to develop personal resilience and enact tactics like setting strong boundaries to counter burnout. While personal resilience and individual actions are important tools to counteract burnout<sup>45</sup>, my research has found organisational and sector behaviours and practices, along with systemic issues, all contribute to burnout; given this, it seems unreasonable to expect that personal actions alone will eradicate burnout in the cultural sector. For example, a strong personal boundary, such as leaving work at 5pm, can be eradicated if an organisational norm is leaving after 5pm and sending emails into the night; having a strong personal boundary may not be enough to counteract the pressure to conform to these norms. Those who do not adhere to problematic organisational norms may fear they will be viewed as not working hard enough or being actively 'disobedient' or unhelpful; or be concerned about future job prospects if they do not adhere to norms.

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<sup>45</sup> The work of Nicholas Petrie on tactics individuals can take to prevent burnout is particularly helpful and interesting, and has supported my thinking around this issue: e.g. <https://nicholaspetrie.com/blog/two-paths-of-burnout>

### 4.3.1 Systemic Causes

Large, systemic issues cause burnout; **organisations and individuals are impacted by world events and crises**. Participants identified lack of funding and the uncertainty caused by financial difficulties, structural inequalities and discrimination, the high cost of living – which is made worse by poor pay levels in the sector, and uncertainty caused by lack of funding, as causes of burnout.

The most cited systemic reason for burnout was **lack of funding and financial pressures**. This will perhaps not be a surprise, given the well-discussed funding and financial issues in the sector, including the long effects of Covid-19 on visitors and visitor income, increased competition for funding, higher bills due and the cost-of-living crisis, and financial cuts that have impacted on the sector.

Leaders described feeling exhausted by the endless financial pressures their organisations are facing, combined with trying to maintain services and programmes with fewer resources and, at times, fewer staff. Some research participants commented on the pressure to deliver funded projects while also struggling to manage financially and without the staff resource to deliver additional work.

[What factors are causing burnout/have caused burnout?]

*"Lack of funding and trying endlessly to make it work."*

*"Money and funding. We're all trying to do much with too little. Externally funded projects don't take into account staff resources to deliver when they should."*

*"..under resourced, lack of wider support, long hours, working harder in order to secure funding"*

The long-effects of the **Covid-19 pandemic** were also noted:

*"Workloads continue to exponentially rise since pandemic as if everyone is fighting for their place at the table. This is not good for the sector and creates a sense of competitiveness between organisations with the sector."*

The research suggests the sector needs to be more considered about understanding its workers have lives outside of work that impact on burnout. People noted, for example, the impacts the pandemic has had on them personally. Work and personal lives are sometimes spoken of as two separate things – concepts like a work/life balance, for example - whereas, in reality, work is part of life; our personal lives and personal circumstances are bound to impact on work and vice versa.

*"I appreciate the lockdowns feel like a long time ago now, but I personally don't feel as if I had time to breathe."*

*"I think the COVID pandemic lockdowns, cost of living crisis, environmental crises, and geopolitical situation have all had a profound impact on everyone's mental health. The cultural sector has faced a lot of threats in its own right in recent years but it's this wider context which makes burnout a very real and present threat."*

**Systemic inequalities** shape people's experience of burnout. A number of disabled people, those from the Global Majority, LGBTQ+ communities, and those who identify as women, stated that **structural racism, homophobia, ableism, and misogyny** – that also on impact on organisational practices and behaviours, including microaggressions and the creation of discriminatory, hostile environments - have caused burnout. This was also linked to being unfairly burdened with being expected to lead anti-discrimination efforts; and a lack of action to tackle discrimination in organisations and the wider sector.

*"Being one of few black women in leadership in the sector, expected to somehow resolve institutional racism and have a roadmap to lead white staff through BLM, quiet quitting, mental ill health and the rest. It's punishing and unviable."*

*"Structural racism and homophobia. Senior colleagues & Trustees engaging performatively with organisational values. Lack of accountability where serious oversights arose around EDI. The isolation of being the only queer person of colour within the organisation, and therefore personally impacted by multiple failures from colleagues across departments."*

*"As a sector, we're really ableist. 20% of UK workforce has a disclosed disability or long-term health issue and we don't do enough around this and I don't know why."*

*"Given the high level of female leaders in the sector, there needs to be a far better understanding of the impacts of perimenopause / menopause. They are likely to be in this age bracket as they reach senior positions and that means they have high likelihood of experiencing symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disturbance / brain fog."*

*"The organisation was very sexist. Men in the room decided things between themselves. It's exhausting when nobody takes any notice because you're a woman and then a man says the same thing as you've just said and they're listened to."*

*"There's also the emotional labour involved in gentle parenting older established professionals and managing their egos and avoiding their triggers which is expected of younger female professionals and is exhausting!"*

Several participants noted **caring responsibilities** exacerbated their burnout, linked to insufficient societal and organisational support for parents and carers, including a lack of flexible working to support those looking after children and other relatives.

*"There is also still not enough flexibility and understanding of needs of parents and especially parent/carers."*

*"We need to think about the demands of increased caring responsibilities for older parents and families."*

The cultural sector alone cannot wholly tackle and dismantle systemic issues that are causing burnout amongst its workers - although it can, and does, work towards tackling these issues. However, it is clear funders, policymakers, sector support organisations, and leaders can take action to protect organisations and staff from these issues, such as creating equitable, inclusive funding models; creating anti-discriminatory organisations and taking a no tolerance stance on discrimination; supporting flexible working; and working with compassion and care towards staff.

#### 4.3.2 Sector-Wide Causes

Participants cited sector-wide causes of burnout, specifically funder requirements and processes, and available funding streams.

The primary cause of burnout relating to funders was the **lack of available funding for core costs**, meaning organisations that are financially stretched need to take on funded projects to get income, that results in an increased workload for staff who are already at capacity. There is also a perception that, in an increasingly competitive funding environment, organisations feel they need to overpromise, without having adequate staff and freelance resources, and financial resources, available to deliver what has been promised. There is a desire to undertake innovative projects but not at the cost of staff.

*"Organisations who want funding feeling under pressure to overpromise and then put pressure on their staff to deliver."*

*"Fund core activity not more projects. To get funding we need to take on more work."*

*"I wish that funding could be sought for core salaries and budget was assured for basic business needs. So much of the time we are relying on the next project to get us through or working on unrealistic / inequitable models."*

*"[To prevent burnout] Keep lobbying and stressing the importance of the heritage and cultural sectors so that they attract more core"*

*funding, rather than just project work. It's all well and good getting money for short term projects (which often have amazing results) but if the support for staff isn't there in general or as part of a core service then it leads to burnout."*

*"Invest in organisations and NOT projects. Stop asking for short term outcomes and impacts and trust the work we all do."*

*"Funders could allow money to be spend on core costs. Grants are a bit useless if all it does is increase workload for already struggling teams."*

*"Competitive application processes tied to planned 'outcomes' and too-high expectations lead organisations to over-promise which puts massive pressure on staff. People need permission to experiment and to fail."*

*"Major funders need to stop funding unrealistic business plans for capital projects which ultimately often lead to excessive workload."*

*"We are trying to change the world with pennies, it's not ok to rely on the good will of workers to try to achieve unrealistic goals."*

*"Grants are a bit useless if all it does is increase workload for already struggling teams."*

Participants raised the issue of the **short-term nature of grants** that can lead to organisations continually applying for short-term funding, and the **competitive nature of funding** that means organisations are fighting for the same pots of funding and commented on grant application processes – which were felt by some to be onerous.

*"Short-term funding is bad for relationships with audiences and stressful for staff."*

*"We're all fighting for short term scraps and it's killing us."*

*"Make applying for funding less laborious and miserable."*

**Poor levels of pay offered to staff and freelancers** who are working on funded projects was also raised as a cause of burnout, with participants feeling funders could do more to advocate for, and insist on, better salaries and rates.

*"Funding bodies need to make it mandatory for institutions receiving funding to pay a professional rate (a current example is an advert for a producer... at £150 a day)."*

*"I'm still very disappointed by the salary levels I see in funded projects."*

Finally, in some cases, funders were perceived to have **not enough oversight of funded projects**; ensuring, throughout the grant funding period, that funded organisations were caring for staff and not exhibiting poor behaviours.

*"The funder did not asking the right questions of the project or dig beneath the surface to see poor behaviours."*

Although funders cannot know every detail of funded-organisations, and poor behaviours can be hidden from them, they could potentially undertake more detailed monitor organisations in relation to behaviours towards staff and staff wellbeing. In addition, they could perhaps further enable in-house staff and freelancers working in and with funded organisations to raise concerns anonymously.

### 4.3.3 Organisational Causes

Organisational practices and behaviours were cited as the primary reason for burnout. Some of these practices are undoubtedly caused by systemic factors, such as lack of funding leading to poor pay and a lack of resources needed to deliver work. Furthermore, the report does not seek to suggest leaders intentionally cause burnout; indeed, as previously noted, the research shows that leaders are suffering from burnout themselves – which might, in turn, lead to behaviours that cause burnout in others, such as making short-term requests to already stretched colleagues. However, it is clear organisational practices need to change in order to create a more resilient, thriving sector that prevents burnout.

#### 4.3.3.1 Overwork and Too Much Work To Do

The most popular cause of burnout was identified as having **too much work to do**. As well as being linked to a lack of funding and other challenges caused by the polycrisis, the research found high workloads are also exacerbated by several organisational factors.

Participants commented that organisational norms were at play, with organisational cultures in which **overwork and working beyond capacity and resources are, and become, the norm**. Once this has been adopted as a cultural norm, overwork is no longer recognised as being unhealthy; it is simply what people do on a daily basis.

*"A culture within a big organisation of "having to do the work" without the resources or support to do so. This contributed to a culture of working late, arriving early and unpaid overtime."*

*"We try to do lots of stuff without the resources to do it."*

*"It's relentless and there's not a lot of recognition of this. You walk through the door at the start of the day and you're on a churning wheel until you finish the day."*

*"Our resources have reduced but ambitions have increased. There doesn't seem to be the recognition that ambitions require resource."*

*"[To prevent burnout] Reduce the level of expectation of what can be achieved on reduced resources (staff and funding). Realise that although this work is important it's not life and death and people's physical and mental health are more important than a programme activity. Be more transparent and honest with the public that as an organisation you are struggling and also focus your remit and mission so that the work isn't all encompassing."*

Some commented that **overwork is a norm of the wider cultural sector**, linked to systemic funding issues, increased competition due to a lack of funding, scarcity of resources, and being under constant pressure to overwork and deliver to enable organisations to survive.

*"There is pressure on everyone to work far beyond core / set hours because of the unwritten rule that people love their jobs and will quite easily work a lot for free / go beyond their job remit to fill gaps but this becomes damaging long term as funders / directors / senior managers don't always see the day to day reality of this and then wonder why staff go off sick / reach burnout / quit etc. There needs to be a bigger conversation across cultural sector disciplines...about approaches to work and expectations and what's realistic and manageable in the long term."*

*"In the context of scarcity, everyone is trying to look good. Everyone is in competition for jobs and audiences."*

*"Too much work, constant demands, no let-up in workload, pressure to deliver, feeling overwhelmed."*

*"An unrelenting concert schedule, with not enough staff to perform jobs. Compounded by unrealistic expectations from senior management about what it was possible to do with the team size in a day/week of work. Meant most people were working vast amounts of overtime (unpaid) and unhealthy habits like eating lunch at desks while still working were the norm."*

*"We need to acknowledge that hundreds of museums only exist because of daft directors like me putting too much in. And then we need to decide whether this is reasonable (it's not). So what can be done? I don't know, but I know too many of us are being ground down into misery."*

*"After Covid, we had all agreed that the target would be to "build back better", which quickly fell by the wayside. Our current ways of working are not sustainable. Let's focus on making simple, smaller things really well, ensure that everyone is considered and treated fairly. Remodel how we work, THEN look at scaling up based on these new sustainable models."*

Participants noted burnout was caused by **being asked to do an unrealistic number of tasks**; working in an **organisation that is understaffed**; or **working in an organisation where staff leave and are not replaced**, with remaining staff being expected to take on additional responsibilities without extra time to carry out these duties. While these issues are also linked to systemic funding issues, they are also caused by organisation-level decisions to try to continue to produce the same amount of work despite staff members leaving.

*"Temporarily stepping into a higher-level promotion on top of my existing job (i.e. doing 2 at once) with no stable admin support and a temporary line manager who didn't understand my role and who had been tasked with restructuring."*

*"I had a team member go off sick due to work-related stress so my workload doubled as I was the only team member who could do the tasks."*

*"[To prevent burnout] Pay better wages and get more staff, not just coping with the minimum staffing levels possible and then struggling when people are sick or on leave. Also, for every service add-on, something needs to be taken off the workload."*

*"[To prevent burnout] Prioritise wellbeing over maintaining unsustainable levels of activity."*

Leaders reported feeling a **sense of pressure to take on tasks that have been allocated to their team members** because they want to support colleagues and prevent them from taking on too much – which then leads to their own burnout.

*"I feel I have to catch all the balls that might be dropped."*

This pressure is exacerbated by **leaders feeling they need to hide their stress and feelings of burnout** from more junior colleagues so as not to worry staff and to present a sense of calmness, especially in the context of polycrisis, which was felt to be important to try to prevent colleagues from becoming anxious.

*"I'm meant to be the calm one and absorb everything."*

*"It's not useful for people to see I'm stressed. I don't know how to show people that life is difficult without it feeling like you're trying to*

*say your problems are bigger than everyone else's. Does anyone really want leaders telling them they're feeling overwhelmed?"*

*"The world doesn't seem ready for vulnerable leadership. You don't necessarily want your boss to look vulnerable."*

**Organisations without strong visions, missions, or strategies** were more likely to cause burnout, as this led to staff finding it difficult, or impossible, to prioritise their work - knowing what tasks and projects to take on and which to drop.

*"If there's no clear organisational strategy, how do you know what to say no to?"*

At times, this was directly linked to senior staff not being perceived to have the skills or experience needed to create appropriate strategies, but participants largely spoke of being **unable to find the time or headspace to produce strategies**. Related to this, participants noted issues with how staff **spend their time** - often in meetings that seem to have no purpose, or spending hours checking and responding to emails. Many noted organisations have **no clear policies or practices around meetings or emails and communication**.

*"We get swept up in the treadmill when we should be looking at the next 5 years, 10 years. We have no time to stop and take a breath."*

*"[What causes burnout] Feeling like there are simply not enough hours in the day so you just go into the night... Then it's repeated late night finishes. But at least no one emails you then! You can actually DO YOUR WORK!"*

*"[What causes burnout] A feeling of 'everything is equally important', overwhelm from digital comms (instant messaging, emails, etc)."*

*"[What causes burnout] There are some general office skills that could make the organisation run more efficiently and reduce the need to have so many meetings or the need to be in the office."*

This speaks to the immense pressure those in the sector are under, with day-to-day tasks and firefighting diminishing time available to focus on strategic work and thinking. However, it perhaps also links to how productivity is defined, often being viewed as delivering tangible outputs, with thinking and reflection time – tasks that do not necessarily immediately result in tangible outputs – perhaps seen as being less 'productive'. Preserving time for the deep thinking that is required to do strategic thinking might feel like a luxury but, without it, organisations can lack the focus that is provided by visions, missions, and strategies, leading to a lack of prioritisation and unfocused activity delivery. In the long-term, spending the time on strategic thinking has the potential to save time, by enabling staff to prioritise and focus on what matters in order to meet strategic aims and objectives.

Several participants mentioned a concern that, in organisations – and a sector – where overwork is the norm, many people are stressed, and this **stress is passed from one person to another**. When experiencing stress, people sometimes make unrealistic demands of colleagues and freelancers, including making last-minute requests – the “*Could you just..? moments*” – that can cause people to feel immense stress. This can lead to chaotic work practices as tasks are prioritised according to people’s stress levels, rather than strategic priorities.

Overwork driven by **organisational self-pressure** was cited as a cause of burnout. This includes high expectations that organisations need to ‘be the best’ and be seen to be the best by winning awards and getting sector recognition. Some participants commented that sector awards can add to this pressure – which is not to say they are a bad thing; celebrating the sector is vital. However, there is a perception that awards can add pressure to already stressed staff, especially as awards often celebrate ‘big’ accomplishments and tangible outputs, such as major exhibitions and programmes, rather than ‘the basics’ or, simply, well-run organisations that are working within their capacity and not burning out staff. There was also a concern that awards might, in some cases, mask the staff overwork and burnout that enabled an award-winning project or programme to happen.

*“What makes or breaks a visit is the small things like clean toilets, not the big exhibitions or innovative programmes, but it’s always the big things that are celebrated; no one gives us medals for clean toilets.”*

*“As a sector, what are we celebrating? What are awards celebrating? What human cost was attached to the things that are being celebrated?”*

Linked to this, issue of **individual and organisational perfectionism** was also raised, with people having high expectations of themselves and others.

*“As a sector, we have to unlearn perfectionism. We see the faults. We need to make sure we set realistic expectations and not feel we need to surpass these”*

*“We have a sense of perfectionism and want people to think our work is the best thing that’s ever been done. It’s exhausting.”*

*“We have to stop being perfectionist.”*

As well as having too much to do, several participants discussed **not feeling they had ‘permission’ to stop working** or to take on fewer tasks. In some cases, this led to people feeling like the only way to take time off was to become seriously physically ill or have a serious accident that would cause them to be signed off sick. It is deeply alarming that some cultural sector workers feel the only way to get vital rest is to become unwell; leaders need to give continual active permission to workers to enable them to take time off; and to model good behaviours, such as not working through lunch or not checking emails at night.

#### 4.3.3.2 Bullying and Poor Behaviours

**Poor and bullying behaviour from trustees, leaders, line managers, and other colleagues** was the second highest cause of burnout amongst participants, including leaders and those in more junior positions. This included:

- Abusive behaviours (including surveillance, coercion, and emotional abuse).
- A lack of support; Not listening to concerns, including about having too much work to do; Not listening to or taking into account personal issues that are affecting work; Poor pastoral care.
- Not prioritising people management responsibilities – for example, not holding or cancelling one-to-one meetings, not spending other dedicated time with direct reports.
- Unrealistic expectations around workload; Not helping staff prioritise workloads; Last-minute decision-making and demands.
- Lack of perceived ability or effort to manage or resolve conflict amongst team members.
- Micromanagement; Lack of autonomy; Lack of trust in people's expertise.
- Lack of understanding of staff roles and their day-to-day duties and responsibilities and capacity.
- Favouritism.
- A lack of kindness.
- Not saying thank you or giving praise.

[What factors caused burnout?]

*"Overwhelming stress with unrelenting pressure and lack of understanding and support, leading to compromised wellbeing."*

*"Stress and pressure at work, psychologically unsafe work environment, poor management, unpredictable and uncontrollable work situation, bullying in workplace, ridiculous workload and expectation with long hours and no time to take full leave. Requesting support from management and HR but nothing changing."*

*"Micro-management, unrealistic expectations on my time, repetitive tasks, bullying from colleagues, never having access to learning and development which actually suited my interests. Also, not having a manager who understood my role in looking after members of my*

*family and the impact it had on my life and ability to come into work fully charged."*

*"Poor organisational values – e.g. tolerance of bullying and other discriminatory behaviours - both towards me as an individual and towards others."*

*"Lack of staff, new team structure without any actual team to do the work so it all fell to me whilst also hoping to apply for a promotion so felt under constant pressure to say yes to things. Failure of HR and management to recognise the issues, felt more bullied into work than supported."*

*"I was being bullied by my immediate superior. I was under extraordinary pressure to achieve the impossible at work and trying to protect my team from the impact."*

*"I left my role...after 2 1/2 years because of exhaustion & depression caused by bullying."*

*"In my experience it [burnout] crept up through a combination of massive pressure and bullying at work and difficulties at home so there was no safe refuge. I did not recognise it as burnout. I don't think I'd even heard the term - this is 5-6 years ago. I struggled to focus, couldn't sleep, felt sick all the time, lost weight, was constantly exhausted, didn't want to see friends, felt terrible about myself, disappeared inward."*

*"When you feel like no one listens, but pretends to, it creates incredible disappointment and eventually burnout."*

[What could/could have be done to prevent burnout?]

*"More approachable manager to discuss worries and reduce stress."*

*"More support from the Board."*

*"If Boards had more connection to the staff and respected their duty of care to these individuals, it would go a very long way."*

*"[My organisation could have] Enacted its policies on workplace bullying. Listened to staff who were reporting problems. Acted when high proportions of staff were leaving as a result of toxic managers. Supported victims instead of protecting bullying managers."*

*"Address the endemic bullying culture."*

*"Eliminating bullying, harassment and toxic work culture."*

While some behaviours and practices may be linked to systemic issues – for example, a lack of support may be due to a manager feeling having much work to do and feeling under pressure to cut back on meetings with direct

reports, the research suggests there is a need to improve leadership and management practices and behaviours in the cultural sector; poor behaviours undoubtedly impact on burnout. The lack of professional HR support in the sector, with some organisations having no HR support or relying on outsourced support, also exacerbates these issues.

#### 4.3.3.3 Poor Pay

The issue of **poor pay** for in-house staff and freelancers, made worse by the high cost of living, was raised by several participants. This is linked to the lack of funding and financial difficulties being experienced by organisations, and the long tradition of low pay in the cultural sector.

*"Another key issues is pay / remuneration. We have leaders of organisations with buildings/ staff / volunteers / freelancers, who may being paid the same as a graduate 2 or 3 years out of university in a commercial / finance/ banking / property businesses."*

*"The field prides itself as a passion job "we don't do it for the money." In reality, staff are gaslit into accepting low pay."*

*"A big, and basic, factor is pay - the sector is horrific in reflecting the work and skills of staff. Increasing the pay of the cultural workers to reflect this would go some way of at least enabling staff to take a proper break and live a life which doesn't always feel like a precarious breadline."*

Low pay also contributes to people feeling trapped in their jobs; they do not have the financial stability to leave a job that is causing them to be burnt out.

*"[How to prevent burnout] Shout more loudly about the fact that museum workers are using foodbanks and cannot afford housing due to salaries remaining stagnant. And finally, help low-paid workers get out of the sector - it can be really really hard to see a way out if you have spent a long time qualifying to work in the museum sector. Support for those who are struggling and need to make a career shift to something better paid would actually be a god-send."*

#### 4.3.3.4 Wellbeing Washing

A number of people spoke of issues relating to **wellbeing washing** – when organisations advocate and show outward support for staff wellbeing without making tangible efforts to tackle structural issues that are diminishing wellbeing. This could look like, for example, running weekly yoga sessions at an organisation that has discriminatory, toxic practices.

Wellbeing washing was cited as a cause of burnout, with people feeling the toil of the disconnect between what they are experiencing (i.e. poor wellbeing) and 'good' wellbeing practices their organisation professes to be delivering.

*"Offering weekly yoga sessions in lunchbreaks is not an effective wellbeing offer. Workers need to better understand their employment rights to be able to speak out when they are feeling burned out."*

*"I like the idea of employing wellbeing officers and providing wellbeing opportunities for staff, but without sorting out the underlying structural issues, you're just providing a sticking plaster."*

*"My organisation says it's committed to wellbeing but the 'wellbeing' things the organisation does is not really having an impact on people's wellbeing; we're in an organisation where everyone is overstretched."*

*"Burnout and wellbeing tend to get treated as individual issues, something a lunchtime yoga session or Headspace trial can address. But the causes of burnout are structural."*

The issue of organisations asking staff to complete staff surveys and give exit interviews to assess wellbeing and satisfaction, then not being perceived to take any action to tackle issues that arise from these, was also raised. People commented on the emotional toil of completing surveys and/or participating in exit interviews and feeling let down when this ultimately did not lead to positive organisational change.

*"We have an annual staff wellness survey. I fill it in and then months will pass, then the end of a staff meetings they'll do a presentation where they compare this year's numbers to last year's numbers and then go away and do nothing."*

*"There's a lot of lip service around these things but little action."*

#### *4.3.3.5 Working Environments*

**Poor or uncreative working office environments** were also raised as not always being productive to enabling thinking, reflection and rest.

*"Our offices are rubbish. The environment needs to be nicer. We need space to be strategic, space to create, space to do the creative process."*

*"Hot desking becoming more of a thing. You used to be able to make your space more homely, but now it's anonymous."*

While, in the context of funding cuts and constrained finances, updating offices might understandably be a lesser priority, configuring offices in ways to support

different modes of working, such as quiet work, collaborative work, and creative ideation, have the potential to a difference to staff.

Along with discussing physical office spaces, a small number of participants commented that flexible working – with work from home arrangements - would help relieve burnout; while others felt organisations needed to have better support in place for people who feel isolated when working from home. It is clear the sector needs to grapple with new ways of working, ensuring it has robust policies and practices in place to enable flexible working and support the wellbeing of staff working in the office and at home.

*"A hybrid work schedule would make a world of difference."*

*[What caused burnout] More isolated working from home. Harder to maintain boundary between work and home life."*

*"There is an old guard at the top that do not understand the pressures of younger generations forced to balance home and work like they never did."*

*"[What caused burnout] Team working from home resulting in extra weight on core staff physically at work."*

#### *4.3.3.6 Freelancers*

Participants who are self-employed commented that their burnout was caused by poor organisational practices:

- Late payments and poor payment practices.
- Low day rates (also exacerbated by funders allowing low day rates to be included in project costs); and expectations to do work for no money.
- Poor procurement practices; and briefs not being able to 'tell the whole story' – meaning freelancers can unknowingly find themselves in toxic environments or dealing with organisational issues that are beyond the scope of their work.
- Stressed clients passing on stress to freelancers.
- Witnessing poor behaviour in the workplace.
- Unrealistically short timescales for project delivery.
- Perceived lack of understanding that freelancers are not free all the time - and have other commitments and responsibilities.
- Lack of opportunity for open, honest conversations about poor working practices for fear of not being hired again.

*"Day rates are going backwards. I don't know what to charge any more. We are told to put our rates up, but low rates that are advertised become the accepted sector rate."*

*"I have a lot of good will, but I can't work for free."*

*"The low pay leads to burnout."*

*"We are sometimes asked to put a huge amount of effort into getting tiny amounts of work. Tendering, contracting, agreeing payment terms. It's really frustrating."*

*"Briefs are vague. There's a need for organisations to be transparent and be honest."*

*"Busy, overloaded staff make us stressed. Everyone is having stress reactions. Understaffing and overload impacts on staff and freelancers. We get burnout from having to swallow the dysfunction."*

*"I don't want to sound negative, so I accept things."*

*"You don't want to complain, or you might not get hired again."*

*"If we all want to deliver a good project, we need to allow time for that."*

*"Freelancers also have caring responsibilities and need holidays."*

#### 4.3.4 Individual Causes

The research found individual/personal factors also contribute to burnout. However, these were not cited as the most significant cause of burnout - indeed, these factors were raised much less than systemic and organisational causes of burnout. While this is not to say individual causes of burnout are less important than others, it provides further evidence to suggest burnout cannot be solved by individuals alone; tackling the issue will require organisational and sector-wide action.

The issue of **passion** was raised as a cause of burnout, with participants noting their passion for the cultural sector and their work perhaps makes them more prone to working long hours and, in some cases, feeling they are responsible for 'saving' their organisations and the wider cultural sector. Several people also mentioned the sector and their role feels like their whole identity, meaning it can be difficult to 'switch off' from work, especially if time not in work is also spent engaging in cultural sector activities, and even volunteering for other cultural sector organisations in spare time outside work.

*"We are very invested in the work and find it hard to let go, even when we have too much to do."*

*"We don't take all our holiday days. There's a sense of having to be here all the time because the organisation wouldn't cope without us; it sounds egotistical. We are invested, we feel obligated, we feel we can't step away."*

*"My whole sense of identity was bound up in this job. We're in it because we care."*

*"Our work is our whole identity. We go to cultural things in our spare time. Spending time outside work not being creative can feel like a survival mechanism."*

*"The sector is set up so we give free hours. We volunteer for other arts organisations outside our work."*

This appears to be made worse by **organisations taking advantage of this passion** by allowing and enabling people to work in unhealthy ways – making this partly an organisational and wider sector issue. Interviewees, in particular, often caveated their responses by commenting they 'know they are lucky' to work in the sector or have their job at all, a sentiment it seems is at times used by leaders to control and coerce individuals; phrases such as, "You're lucky to work here/to have a job in this sector" can feel like a threat, making people feel they are dispensable. The unhealthy belief about being 'lucky' to work in the sector that seems to be pervasive, perhaps leading to people feeling they cannot leave their job or the sector, or feeling they have no choice but to put up with toxic practices.

*"There's an expectation that you'll do everything and you'll suck it up...that you should feel lucky to have this job and work in this sector. We're told we're lucky to be where we are, not that we're good at what we do."*

*"You feel you are privileged even though your salary is appalling."*

*"People work in the cultural sector because they care about it and are driven by a sense of purpose. It's not for the money. But this can be exploited. The sector relies on people going above and beyond, giving more and more. It's often hard to maintain boundaries."*

*"People who love the work that they do are even more likely to burnout because they will justify working for love. Museum work was like an abusive relationship that I kept going back to because I loved it. I believed them when they said "it won't happen again". It always happened again."*

Finally, a number of participants referred to their belief that specific **personality traits** or characteristics have potentially made them more at risk of burnout - including being people pleasers and conflict avoiders.

*"[Causes of burnout] Endless firefighting within the organisation combined with my own personality type as a 'sensitive striver'."*

*"People pleasing is common. I had to stop caring so much about what people think."*

#### 4.4 Impacts of Burnout

While the research suggests organisational and systemic issues are largely the cause of people's burnout, it seems the impacts of burnout are primarily being felt by individuals, including health issues and loss of confidence and self-esteem.

Burnout also impacts on organisations, with burnt out staff becoming, for example, unfocused, unmotivated, and less productive. There is a clear ethical and business case for tackling burnout – so the sector carries out its duty of care to staff and supports organisations to become more resilient.

##### 4.4.1 Personal Impacts

Burnout can come at enormous short and long-term personal cost to those who experience it.

Burnout predominantly impacts on **people's mental and physical health**. Many participants reported health issues, including anxiety, insomnia, and memory loss. Mental health issues were particularly prevalent amongst responses, with many participants reporting anxiety and depression, and some reporting developing PTSD or experiencing nervous breakdowns. For a number of people, these issues did not stop when they left a role; they became longer-term issues that, in some cases, have led to people being unemployed for a long period of time.

*"You feel numb. There's extreme stress and detachment and less ability to have perspective. Physical tiredness, forgetfulness, lack of focus. A vital essence has gone."*

*"[Burnout had] A profound impact on my mental health and personal life."*

*"[Burnout caused] Severe mental ill health issues as a result of prolonged stress and overwork."*

*"I have therapy to help manage PTSD and anxiety because of what I experienced."*

*"I went on antidepressants and changed sector. It was very damaging to my mental health and took me a long time to get over it."*

*"Burnout has first and foremost impacted my mental and physical health. I have felt anxious, tense, irritable, and hopeless at many points this year."*

*"My personal relationship was falling apart, and my health was shot. I was a shadow of myself. The doctor begged to sign me off, and I finally agreed. It was therapy that saved me."*

*"I've had some extraordinary experiences in this industry, but I am mourning how much of my health, happiness and my own goals I have given up to feed the beast of this sector. I am also worried that I'll never recover. I don't have lots of savings because I've worked in the arts for my entire career. I have to keep working but I'm not getting better. How do I take the time to recover? Who will catch me if I fall? The thought terrifies me."*

Burnout does not just impact on cultural sector workers, but also, at times, their friends and family. Several people commented that their own burnout had **affected personal relationships**, including leading to breakdown, or near breakdown, of romantic relationships. Some said burnout had left them **unable to properly care for themselves outside of work**, as all their energy was 'used up' working. This led to their partners needing to take on a caring role at home; for example, taking on all household cooking and cleaning tasks to support burnt out partners.

*"It is having a negative impact on my marriage as I'm too tired often to talk to my partner and get irritable easily."*

*"My relationship with my partner and my family and friends has been tested in different ways."*

*"I experienced loss of confidence, guilt, loss of earnings and damage to my health and wellbeing for a time. It also took a toll on my personal relationships. I left the role eventually, it wasn't sustainable."*

*"Burnout is a hidden danger, and it causes long-term harm. It takes years to heal. I have found it so hard to get to this point. I should not have experienced this, it impacted my friends and family too. It has been the hardest thing I have experienced. It makes me so sad I had to go through that, after working so hard to gain a first-class degree in the field I was working in."*

*"You are just existing. Probably still functioning, just, because there's bills to pay. But you enjoy nothing. You feel numb. You are on autopilot. It's autopilot or die. Everything you cherish suffers; your relationships, your self worth, your love of anything."*

The impacts of burnout, and trauma associated with burnout, can be **felt a long time after someone has left an organisation**. Participants who had left organisations because of burnout had experienced, for example, chronic health issues, a long-term loss of confidence, guilt, can be burdened with a belief they are a 'failure' for not having stayed at an organisation and/or in the sector, and lose confidence that the cultural sector can ever provide safe working spaces. These can also be barriers to future career progression in and outside of the sector.

*"Damaged work relationships due to my emotional state. Damaged personal relationship at the time. Several months off work, signed off by GP. Felt I had failed. Felt others thought I had failed or was too unstable to cope with more senior responsibilities. Permanently lowered my stress threshold, and even 20 years later I am wary of taking on more senior roles for fear of not coping."*

*"Ultimately, I left the role and organisation I was working in and lost a sense of pride and passion in my work. 4 months on, I still feel that I am struggling to re-engage with my motivation."*

*"[I left my job] feeling traumatised. I would say it was a good 2 years before I stopped having anxiety dreams and felt like I had properly escaped."*

*"Left the role, challenging emotional health, started tribunal, still find workplaces triggering after years."*

*"I think I have the skills to take on a big, senior job, but I'm afraid I won't be able to keep up with the pace and will fail and/or have a health crisis caused by overwork."*

*"I can't face going back into a toxic workplace."*

*"My experience has left me wary of other workplaces."*

*"I've lost my faith in the arts."*

*"People I know who have left the sector say their lives are so much better."*

The majority of participants who had experienced burnout **left the role that had caused burnout**. This is an example of cultural sector workers taking action to protect themselves from a system that causes burnout. It is deeply saddening that individuals are being forced to take action to jobs and the sector

– and sometimes risking financial instability and unemployment - because organisations and the sector have caused them to become burnt out.

*"I feel better for leaving behind a work environment where I felt unvalued and unsupported, but I'm also sad that I had to make the change rather than my employers."*

*"I left my job. It was my dream job that turned out to be a nightmare. I was truly passionate about the work which caused me to burn out even more. I stayed too long because I cared; it hurt me even more that way."*

*"I left a previous role due to burnout and took a six-month career break to recover. I am again experiencing burnout in my current role and plan to leave soon. I am considering leaving the arts and heritage sector altogether."*

*"The job has become entirely untenable."*

*"Left role, career change, financial hardship."*

Some of those who had left roles commented they were supported financially by a partner, which meant they were able to leave and remain financially stable. However, people who are not in this financial position may not be able to leave roles – and no cultural sector worker should have to rely on others to financially support them due to having to leave a role that was burning them out.

*"I'm fortunate I have money; my partner is quite well off. I left and spent time out of work. If I'd not, I worry I'd have had a breakdown."*

Some **participants who had not left their role felt 'trapped'**; unable to leave due to financial pressures and, at times, not knowing what roles to do outside the cultural sector or worrying their current skillset will not transfer to other sectors.

*"I want to leave my role but I now hate both social media and museums so much that I've had a total existential crisis and can't imagine any job at all that I'm qualified for and may make me feel even slightly fulfilled. I never want to step near museums again - despite having spent three decades doing everything I can to work there and promote their missions."*

*"I want to leave but feel stuck."*

A number of people – both those who had stayed in roles/the sector and those who had left - reported feeling **cynical about and resentful of the sector**; and being fearful other roles and organisations would also cause them to become burnt out due to the prevalence of burnout in the sector.

*"I now resent my career, I lack interest in anything to do with my sector. I quit my full-time job and am now unemployed. Considering a new career but I'm still burnt out, so nothing is interesting or motivating me yet."*

*"It makes me sad, it makes me want to leave my role and the sector. I take it home with me and end up sad and stressed in my off work time. I worry about coming to work."*

*"I'm wondering if culture is safe as a career choice full stop."*

#### *4.4.2.1 Self-Protection*

Along with leaving roles that are causing burnout, or the sector entirely, people are **adopting other strategies to protect themselves from burnout**. Self-protection practices and behaviours are particularly prevalent amongst people who have previously experienced burnout and are fearful of experiencing burnout again. These include:

- Trying not to care so much about work or an organisation.
- Deciding to not work on specific tasks that are causing burnout.
- Trying to control the factors that they are able to control – which, sadly, was linked, by some people, to feeling they need to accept their organisation will always cause burnout.

*"Not caring about anything any more."*

*"I care less than I did."*

*"I stopped going to meetings. I wasn't being listened to and it wasn't worth the energy."*

*"I now view things differently and don't expect change from the organisation or certain individuals. I still help people where I can and within my limitations."*

A number of participants, in particular – but not only - women in their 30, 40s and 50s who had previously been in leadership positions, had made the decision to **go freelance** to escape organisations with toxic practices and behaviours that had caused burnout. Freelancing was perceived as being safer than working in-house; they no longer, for example, had to experience unpleasant office politics, difficult relationships with colleagues, bullying, and not feeling listened to or respected.

Many of these participants shared they were reluctant to return to in-house roles for fear of future burnout; in some cases, participants commented they could not

risk experiencing burnout again, given the negative impacts burnout had previously had on their mental health.

While going freelance can be empowering and a positive decision – and it should be noted, many people said they were finding freelancing more satisfying than previous in-house roles -, no one should feel they have no choice but to freelance in order to try to keep themselves safe. In addition, as this research has shown, freelancing in the sector can come with its own issues; going freelance is great for some people, and can be a happy, fulfilling role, but it is not a panacea. In addition, there is a danger the sector the sector losing the opportunity to employ capable, experienced people in leadership roles, because they are traumatised from experiences of burnout, thus fearful of taking on other roles.

*"It's currently safer to freelance."*

*"I quit my job with nothing to go to (terrifying!) and considered leaving the arts altogether. I am now a freelancer as I couldn't face being employed again."*

*"I don't want people to know where I am on any given day – that's a reaction to burnout."*

*"When director jobs come up, I value my freedom too much. I don't want to go back to something more stressful."*

*"My mental health suffered greatly until I finally broke one morning, arrived at my desk and wrote a resignation letter which I handed in 10 minutes later. I went freelance three months later, leaving a job I loved but recognising that it was impacting my health and relationships. I have become quite cynical about organisations. I don't think I will ever work as an employee again."*

#### 4.4.2 Organisational Impacts

Burnout also impacts on organisations, decreasing organisational resilience; people commented that they are **not able to work as effectively** as they can when not burnt out. Participants reported that burnout had made them feel less motivated, lacking in focus, and had impacted negatively on their morale and overall work performance.

*"Burnout for me feels like a complete physical and mental exhaustion, or the inability to motivate myself to care about a job that I usually adore."*

*"A reluctance to wake up, operating in a non present capacity at work and feeling robotic, not interested in work culture anymore."*

*"You haven't got the energy to face anything (especially work)."*

*"The quality of my work really suffered due to burn out. I just couldn't do it. I couldn't find any reason or motivation to continue."*

*"Work overload to the extent that it starts effecting performance and health."*

*"Lack of motivation, frustration, reduced capacity, difficulty engaging with others or completing usually routine work."*

*"Lost energy, stamina, motivation and morale."*

*"Lack of motivation, exhaustion, resentment, depression, lack of drive and inspiration."*

*"Lack of motivation and passion in something you previously had endless energy for."*

The **health impacts of burnout are also felt by organisations**; ill-health had led to participants having to go on sick leave, taking anything from a few weeks to a few months off work.

*"I was signed off sick for 5 months, the doctor said the environment needed to change but my workplace did not know how to make this happen."*

*"Have left a role in the sector previously due to burn out. In at least 2 other roles have taken time off sick (short term) with stress / burnout."*

As previously discussed, the research also found burnout can lead to people leaving their jobs and sometimes leaving the sector – or wanting to leave their role. This impacts on both individuals, who must find other roles and may have periods of unemployment, and on organisations, who lose staff and may have to invest in recruitment to replace staff who have left.

#### 4.5 A Silenced Epidemic

Participants referred to a **culture of silence** that left them feeling unable to raise issues around burnout with managers or trustees, due to worries they would not be listened to or not taken seriously; or to talk about experiences of burnout for fear of this negatively impacting on their career, particularly in a relatively small sector in which many people know each other. Not feeling able to discuss experiences perhaps exacerbates burnout; poor behaviours are not addressed, and people are perhaps more likely to internalise burnout as a personal failure.

*"I've always found it very difficult to be honest about what my organisation is like as you don't want to seem unprofessional, so I didn't know how honest to be."*

*"Maybe I should have blown the whistle, but this could be career ending and my org[anisation] made it hard to do."*

However, others noted **they have raised burnout with colleagues and trustees but have not felt listened to or supported**. This finding was also reflected in interviews and survey responses in which people have shared they felt grateful to be able to talk their experiences of burnout by participating in this research; this has been an opportunity for those who have impacted by burnout to share their experiences and be listened to. Burnout can perhaps be described as a '**silenced epidemic**', as many of those who have experienced, or are experiencing, burnout being silenced by not being listened to, or being performatively listened to but no action being taken to make positive change.

*"[What could prevent burnout] Take action when employees flag that they are burnt out as a sign that processes do not work."*

*"Totally overwhelmed. Emotionally and physically exhausted, absolutely nothing left. Unable to properly function. Memory problems. Panic symptoms. Disillusioned and cynical - loss of joy in work and life, loss of faith in organisational values and leadership. Crying on the way to work. Not feeling heard when expressing issues of overwork."*

#### 4.6 A Sense of Hopelessness

In analysing the interview and survey data, I noted the prevalence of **narratives of hopelessness**. There is, amongst some people, a belief organisations and the sector can never change, that everyone in the cultural sector has to work long hours because 'they always have done', and that nothing can be done to prevent burnout. Given the entrenched nature of burnout in the cultural sector, it is perhaps unsurprising some cultural sector workers feel that nothing can change.

*"Everything's shit and it's not going to change."*

*"People burn out and leave the sector and that's it."*

*The sector is in bad shape and has been for a long time."*

*"The sector is broken."*

*"It's endemic and will not be fixed any time soon. It's culturally entrenched from every angle, the UK cultural sector is a fundamentally unhealthy and unhappy place to work."*

The narrative of hopelessness suggests care and compassion is needed from across the sector to support the many sector workers who have suffered and are suffering from burnout. People who have experienced burnout need to be listened to and acknowledged; the crisis of burnout in the cultural sector can no longer be ignored.

Changing the narrative will take a collective effort, with individuals and organisations taking action to reduce and prevent burnout. Small changes across the sector can lead to bigger change, unpicking and altering unhealthy and embedded sector norms, and enabling the collective creation of a sector with nourishing, caring working practices.

## 5.0 Reflections and Recommendations

The following sets out some personal reflections on the findings of the research, followed by recommendations for future practice.

### 5.1 A Path To A Better Future

Despite the existence of previous research and anecdotal evidence around the issue of burnout in the cultural sector, it appears little has been done to try to prevent or decrease burnout - and, indeed, that burnout is on the rise.

This report is not about apportioning blame or singling people, funders, or organisations out. Indeed, I would argue so little has been done to tackle burnout because the issue is so widespread it perhaps feels too big to tackle; and as, after years of battling crises, the sector is so exhausted and collectively burnt out that finding the time and headspace to consider and implement solutions to prevent burnout can feel impossible. I hope the recommendations in this report offer a path forward for the sector.

I acknowledge this path is not straightforward; we are up against structural inequalities; deep and harmful systemic issues; and ingrained cultures and behaviours. Sector-wide change will take time. However, I believe change is possible. Hope is a powerful tool that can turn the seemingly impossible into the possible; a tool of resistance and resilience that we must hold on to, giving us the collective strength to navigate our way to a better future.

Some of the recommendations relate to long-term change and tackling systemic issues; this will require time and sustained effort from across the sector to implement, but I believe it can be achieved with intentional, collective action. Many of the recommendations are smaller actions that can make a difference in the short and medium-term. Small actions, undertaken collectively, can lead to big change, slowly changing sector norms and leading to the creation of a sector that practices slower, more regenerative ways of working.

While I do not expect every organisation to implement all the recommendations - and it will be important for leaders to consider exactly which recommendations best suit their organisations, I hope those reading this report will find a recommendation, or recommendations, that resonate with them. You might find it helpful to listen to colleagues and freelancers to understand what specific factors are causing burnout and work together to consider practical actions that can spark a culture change. There is no set timetable for change - go at a pace that suits you and your organisation; wholesale tackling burnout does not - and cannot - happen quickly and should not add to feelings of burnout.

## 5.2 The Urgent Need for Change

Burnout should not be an inevitable consequence of working in the cultural sector. In my view, the sector cannot profess to deeply care about inclusion, compassion, and values-led practice if its working cultures actively harm those working in the sector and if burnout is perceived as an inevitable consequence of working in the sector, leading to a failure to take action to make a change. I hope, as a sector, we can come together to make this change.

The sector has increasingly been concerned with the wellbeing of audiences, developing programmes and projects designed to positively impact on people's wellbeing, and conducting research that demonstrates the impact of participating in culture on wellbeing - which is hugely positive, particularly with the growing mental health crisis<sup>46</sup>. Now is the time to view cultural sector workers' experiences and wellbeing as being as important as visitor and audience wellbeing; we are all humans and can all experience poor mental health and burnout.

There is an ethical and business case for tackling burnout, and a case for diversity. Firstly, on ethics, the sector must show duty of care to its workers. Secondly, for the sector to truly thrive, it is essential that its key assets and champions - workers - are supported, nourished, energised, and able to thrive. Finally, it is clear organisational practices have greater impact on marginalised communities, including people from the Global Majority, disabled people, LGBTQ+ communities, and women. Tackling burnout and creating more nourishing cultures will support the sector to be more inclusive and make steps towards more diverse workforces, including in leadership.

We cannot expect that the goodwill that has existed in - and has arguably helped power - the sector will continue forever. Without action, cultural sector workers will still get sick, organisations will continue to lose staff to sickness and new roles, and organisations will continue to be less resilient because of staff burnout. If the sector is serious about wanting to become

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<sup>46</sup> Mind, *The Big Mental Health Report 2024*, (2024), accessed 4 April 2025, <https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/reports-and-guides/the-big-mental-health-report-2024/>

more resilient, addressing burnout is essential – and efforts to do this must begin now.

Working together to address burnout will mean collectively making the space to reflect and take action. It will mean acting with kindness and compassion towards one another and coming together in hopeful collaboration, to tackle one of the most urgent issues that is facing the sector. I remain hopeful things can change – if we work together.

### 5.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged from the research, with some being contributed by research participants. They have been grouped into recommendations for funders and wider sector agencies; and organisations – and include recommendations to support in-house staff and freelancers.

#### 5.2.1 Acknowledgement and Readiness for Change

- Acknowledge burnout is happening and is a crisis. The research indicates concerns about burnout are often not listened to or addressed. It is crucial to acknowledge and recognise that burnout in the sector is a crisis and act accordingly and with urgency. Take action to end the culture of silence around burnout. Listen to colleagues across the sector who are experiencing burnout and acknowledge these experiences. This may also require a shift in thinking around the causes of burnout; as is evident, burnout is not simply a personal issue that can be resolved by individual behaviours; it is largely the result of systemic and organisational issues that need to be addressed by organisations and the wider sector.
- Burnout is entrenched in the sector and has become a sector norm. Those working in the sector are used to these norms, have come to expect them and, in some cases, have normalised them. It will require active work to change these norms, through individual and sector-wide action. There is no one solution to burnout; collective action is required.
- Counter the narratives of hopelessness, working together to make a change. These narratives are understandable, given the entrenched nature of burnout in the sector. A shift in thinking is required; burnout is not inevitable, and we can take action to make things better.

## 5.2.2 Structural Change

- Structural change is needed. Having too much to do is a norm of the cultural sector. This will continue if the sector continues to underfund, understaff, and overstretch. What if everyone slowed down? What if slower, more intentional practice became the norm? The sector must create business models around doing less, regenerative practice, and working within its resources. There is a need to push back on hyper-competition, hierarchies, and seemingly inevitable stress through increased collaboration and sharing across the sector and with organisations beyond the sector. The sector must act with care and intention to put people and planet first and work in slower, more regenerative ways. This could include small actions to shape and adopt new norms, including not working beyond working hours; and setting realistic expectations of what 'good' looks like, so organisations feel more able to work within capacity and resources without losing ambition and innovation.
- A scarcity mindset is wholly understandable, given the dire financial context in which the sector has existed for many years. Can the sector work together to create collaborative abundance; collaborating and sharing resources, and making intentional decisions around this, for the benefit of everyone? Rethinking a scarcity mindset would not mean being passive or feeling okay about the financial context; this would be about shifting mindset, as much as is possible, to support the sector to flourish.

## 5.2.3 Recommendation for Funders, Policymakers, and Sector support Organisations

### 5.2.3.1 *Support for Individuals*

- Support cultural sector staff through individual and group coaching, mentoring, action learning, counselling, and careers support. Fund paid sabbaticals – time away from organisations with minimal reporting or expectations, which gives leaders vital opportunities to think, reflect, and plan.
- Invest in leadership and management training and development, including supporting those with line management responsibilities to learn and develop people management skills.

### *5.2.3.2 Support for Funded Organisations*

- Deliver anti-discrimination training; training on burnout, and how to reduce burnout for staff and freelancers; and training on how to work ethically with freelancers to funded organisations.
- Ensure funding covers adequate staffing and freelancing, at appropriate pay levels, and covers development and delivery costs. Provide funding to support organisations pay freelancers a fee to support the time to takes to write tenders.
- Create more funding opportunities to support core costs. While this might mean funding fewer projects, more funding of the basics could offer a sense of security that enables people to take greater risks and experiment more, in the knowledge the basics are covered.
- There has been a move to lessen expectations/not require as much from organisations and freelancers who are applying for funding and delivering funded project; however, the research suggests grant application processes and project and programme delivery can be overly stressful and laborious. Be clear about expectations and requirements, including reporting requirements and consult with organisations and freelancers to ensure these are realistic and proportionate.
- Actively monitor wellbeing of staff working at and with funded organisations, and offer safe, confidential spaces for staff and freelancers to raise concerns.

### *5.2.3.3 Other Support for The Sector*

- Advocate for, and model, better pay across the sector and good working practices, such as flexible working.
- Create awards that recognise good practice and good work cultures. Celebrate organisations that are delivering good work while working within their capacity and financial resources, and in ways that are not burning staff out.

## 5.2.4 Recommendations for Organisations

### 5.2.4.1 Addressing Employee Burnout

#### **Purpose-Driven Productivity**

- Have a strong vision, mission and forward plan in place, and prioritise work that meets your vision and strategic objectives.
- When a new potential project arises, consider the impact on staff and resources and do not overstretch.
- Start and end meetings on time. Make sure all meetings have a stated purpose and desired outcomes. Carefully facilitate meetings to keep them on track. Create open, supportive and non-judgemental spaces where everyone can participate and contribute to decision-making.
- Allocate time in diaries for strategy, thinking, celebration, and rest – they are essential tools for creativity, innovative thinking, and organisational resilience.

#### **Behaviours**

- Model anti-burnout behaviours - for example, take breaks, leave on time, and take TOIL and annual leave. If you need work outside working hours, consider putting a delay on emails sent during the evening and weekend so they are received during work hours.
- Set realistic expectations and workloads. Support staff prioritise their workloads.
- Create open and transparent cultures. Be as open as possible about issues and clearly explain reasons behind decisions.
- Work with curiosity, care, and compassion. Be curious about staff work experiences. Actively listen to staff, encouraging them to share concerns and working collaboratively to solve issues.
- Give as much notice as possible when asking a colleague to complete a task. Keep short notice requests to a minimum – and only do this if a task is genuinely urgent.
- Put in place regular one-to-one meetings and wellbeing check-ins with people you manage. These are a valuable opportunity for colleagues to raise challenges and think through solutions, discuss performance and workload, and get feedback and guidance.
- Act on the results of staff surveys and exit interviews in a timely manner. Clearly explain these actions to staff so they can understand what is being done to address issues that have been raised.

- Openly praise and thank staff.

### **Policies and Working Environment**

- Create robust anti-discrimination policies and embed inclusive working practices.
- Include burnout in risk registers – it is a substantial risk to personal and organisational health.
- Create safe, supportive working environments. Adopt a no tolerance policy for bullying and harassment.
- Invest in conflict resolution training and engage in conflict resolution and mediation to tackle poor behaviours or difficulties between colleagues before they escalate.
- Create robust policies around flexible, hybrid, and home working – and ensure staff working in venues/offices and at home are supported.
- Create workspaces that support different modes of working. This might include quiet work, creative ideation, and collaboration.
- Find alternative, creative spaces for meetings, such as gallery and performance spaces or outdoor spaces.
- Nominate a board member to monitor and champion anti-burnout behaviour.
- Invest in professional HR support and training.

### **Training and Additional Support**

- Offer workplace culture training to all employees so everyone understands what a good culture looks like and can contribute towards creating this.
- Invest in coaching and mentoring for staff.
- Offer mental health days and extra time off, especially after energy-sapping activities such as big events and exhibition installations.
- Wellbeing measures, like putting on a yoga class, might be helpful for some, but they can make staff feel worse if they are viewed as 'sticking plaster' over a poor working culture. That is not to say do not deliver wellbeing sessions, but these must be embedded alongside creating a happy working culture.

#### *5.2.4.2 Addressing Freelancer Burnout*

##### **Pay**

- Pay freelancers at an appropriate rate. Freelancer day rates cover a multitude of expenses, including taxes, holiday and sickness pay, and business costs. If you are unsure how much to pay, look for published sector advice and consult with freelancers.
- Pay freelancers on time and schedule payments for longer projects appropriately – no one should have to wait weeks and months to be paid for work they have delivered.

##### **Procurement**

- Ensure procurement processes are appropriate for the level of pay and work required. Where possible, simplify procurement processes. Allow for alternative application methods - for example, video applications - to support accessibility.
- Create clear briefs that set out the project scope, timeline, budget, and expectations.
- Do not change the scope of projects without first discussing this with the contracted freelancer. If the scope needs to change, this might mean you need to increase the project budget and timeframe.

##### **Policies and Behaviours**

- Set clear communications arrangements at project commencement, in collaboration with freelancers. Understand freelancers may be working on multiple projects at once and may not always be immediately available.
- Include freelancers in decision-making processes about projects that affect them.
- Invite freelancers to attend staff training sessions and work celebrations.
- Include freelancers in organisational policies.
- Thank freelancers for their contribution.

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