



Overview and Introduction

In response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe's year off as a result, in August 2020, Staging Change and The Greenhouse created the #FutureFringe campaign. Initially a data-collection project financially supported by the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, the campaign encouraged Fringe stakeholders (venues, companies, freelancers, locals, participants, audiences) to consider how the festival can be improved for the future. The data from the original survey showed a want – and an urgent need – to improve the diversity, sustainability, accessibility, and fairness of the Fringe.

As a result, Staging Change and The Greenhouse set up a pilot steering group made up of seven grassroots organisations working in these fields. We have called ourselves a 'steering group' because we will use our findings to steer venues, participants, and other stakeholders, towards a better future for the Fringe. Because the Fringe festival is decentralised, we hope this will allow more individuals and organisations to put their hands on the wheel and create change.

The pilot steering group was made up of:

- [The Greenhouse Theatre](#)
- [Staging Change](#)
- [Fringe of Colour](#)
- [Working Class Artist Group](#)
- [Birds of Paradise](#)
- [Activising for Change](#)
- [Something to Aim For](#)
- [Power Play](#)
- Morvern Cunningham (Freelancer and Edinburgh local)

There is more information on these people and organisations in Appendix A.

We met two times over six months to identify the key issues. The first meeting focused on the issues - the main issues our steering group have experienced at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and the key barriers to making change. The second meeting looked at possible solutions. This report was then compiled by *The Greenhouse Theatre* and *Staging Change*, and reflects the headlines from these meetings.

Financially supported by the University of Edinburgh, the pilot steering group meetings were a formal space for collaboration, to support one another to find creative solutions and work holistically rather than one problem at a time.

Following the release of this report, the Future Fringe Steering Group had hoped to help shape the guiding principles suggested later in the report. However, we have been unable to secure the funding necessary to complete this. The Fringe Society have highlighted some of this work is being undertaken internally at the moment. We hope that our report will help shape and strengthen their work



Meeting 1 – Key Challenges

Purpose: Our first meeting aimed to explore the issues that the above grassroots organisations had previously experienced at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival - a first step to making the festival a more diverse, accessible, sustainable, and fair event in meeting 2.

First, we asked the steering group to share the positives of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. They felt the festival is...

- Creative
- Electric
- Invigorating
- Inspiring
- Spontaneous
- Connecting
- Distinct
- Magical
- Pushing boundaries

They also acknowledge that the Fringe Society created a Blueprint in 2018, outlining commitments they have made to make the festival more diverse, sustainable, accessible and fair. Furthermore, Fringe Central and Fringe Connect offer a place for festival participants and organisations to gather and share ideas.

The steering group raised the following as issues they had experienced at the festival:

- A growth mindset – As the ‘largest arts festival in the world’, there is a pressure to continue to expand, no matter the cost.
- ‘Open Access’ – there is a strong commitment to this core value of the festival, especially amongst higher-level stakeholders. Whilst this may seem positive, it leads to a lack of regulation across the festival landscape. That serves the status-quo, and makes it difficult to achieve real progress.
- Responsibility – As the organisation overseeing the whole of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the Fringe Society’s position of neutrality removes decision-making power. There are no clear accountability structures currently in place.
- Benefit – it is often not made explicitly clear who is intended to benefit from the different aspects of the festival.
- Access – The festival is less accessible to some participants and audiences than others, based on ethnicity, class and disability as examples.
- We’re yet to find a sustainable business model for subsidised performance at the Fringe. This means many participants have to accept financial risk when performing at the Fringe.
- Decision makers – Decisions are often made by individual profit-driven organisations, such as large venues and the University of Edinburgh as a landlord.
- Power – The fear as Fringe participants that there’s always someone else to take your place, and therefore feeling powerless in standing for core values, and/or pushing for change.



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Our Steering Group also experienced the following main barriers to addressing the issues above:

- The festival growth makes it harder to manage.
- Money - stakeholders, such as corporate sponsors and property owners, may be resistant to change while smaller organisations cannot 'afford' to change
- The number of third-party strategic partners means that there is reduced accountability for proper provisions, ensuring workers get properly paid, and that sustainability, accessibility, diversity and fairness of venues and companies is prioritised.
- Limited support for grassroots organisations working in these fields. Work done by third parties and grassroots organisations can be energy and time intensive, and often unpaid, despite benefiting the festival and venues.
- Due to the pop-up nature of the Festivals, there is often limited time (and funds) for change.
- Lack of transparency and understanding - some participants are unaware of the organisational structure of the festival, and how they can promote change.

Initial Conclusions:

As a group of grassroots organisations, we believe the structures of the Fringe need to change in order to be more diverse, accessible, sustainable and fair. In our next meeting, we aimed to discuss a series of solutions with the hope to then open a dialogue with stakeholders around these ideas, testing them and adapting them over time. We believe it is important to be transparent when making change, sharing both the successes and failures in order to help others move forwards, but, venues, participants, the Council, the University, and Scottish Government and Fringe Society need to hold each other accountable to trying, and vice versa.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is the biggest arts festival in the world. It wasn't always. We want to look at the story of the Fringe, and perhaps re-examine the original Core Values in a contemporary context. Maybe this will help us understand where these problems started so we can begin to undo them.



Meeting 2 – Possible Solutions

Purpose: To explore and propose potential solutions to the problems identified in meeting 1. We hope that our steering group could suggest a way forward to help build a better, fairer Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

What is working?

We began by exploring some of the examples of best practice. We looked at what we thought was working well at the Fringe, or in other similar contexts around the world.

- The conversations opened and the work done by grassroots organisations has built momentum. It feels like with longer term support we could be at a point of real change
- The University of Edinburgh and The Fringe Society provide some support to grassroots organisations trying to build a more diverse, sustainable, inclusive, accessible and fair future for the festival, but it is limited.

It was noted by the group that the work they do as grassroots organisations is often ‘surface level’, requiring a lot of time and labour-intensive work from small, external organisations, with relatively little pay-off. It also seems that this work can gloss over the more fundamental issues. Creating change from outside existing Fringe structures therefore seems unsustainable. Yet the decentralised nature of the festival makes identifying issues and creating change internally more challenging.

What is needed?

We then moved on to asking the organisations in the steering group what is needed to address the identified challenges.

- All stakeholders could set boundaries in collaboration with existing Fringe structures to challenge the issues arising from lack of regulation. We wonder what would happen if together with this steering group, venues, landlords, Fringe Society, the Council and participants could set some intentions, or guiding principles, for the next year, five years, ten years and onwards. Stakeholders could then sign up to these for 2022. Examples of what these might look like can be found in Appendix B.
- Continued interaction between groups and individuals working on different issues is important – to continue demonstrating (and acting on) appetite for deep and widespread change.
- Finance – the financial model for artists at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe is challenging. A way of ensuring participants and volunteers at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe are better funded and better paid to support enacting change across every level is crucial. Similarly, financial support for organisations working to improve the Edinburgh Festival Fringe around the year is needed.
- Wider support, from participants, audiences and venues, would make these calls to action stronger. The Future Fringe data collection already shows some appetite, but this could go further – a critical mass of artists is needed to make meaningful change.



Headlines, Questions, and Solutions

Headlines

Through the Future Fringe Steering Group, our grassroots organisations raised a handful of headline challenges and issues that they have experienced. These boil down to:

- The Fringe has a growth mindset. Bigger is not always better, and an emphasis on growth exacerbates already existing issues in the Fringe ecology.
- The idea of an 'Open Access' festival sounds great on paper. In practice, the steering board felt it limits the accessibility of the festival, creating a 'pay-to-perform' landscape that is financially and emotionally taxing. A common set of standards could help ensure the festival is better, fairer and more sustainable.
- Whilst the arts in the UK are a financially challenging landscape, the Fringe is particularly financially challenging.
- The steering board felt the tendency for the Fringe Society to remove itself from decision-making in the name of upholding 'Open Access' contributes to this problem.
- It is unclear who is accountable for which aspects of the Fringe, and who can/should take charge of making those aspects better. Similar, it is unclear who the Fringe is explicitly designed for, and who is meant to benefit from the different aspects of the festival.
- This moment is a unique opportunity to establish an intention for the Fringe articulated and created by stakeholders at every level.

Questions

From these headlines, we have developed a series of questions. The Steering Group would like to explore these questions going forward, alongside researchers at the University.

- Who is best placed to take action?
- What actions can different stakeholder groups take?
- What alternative funding and ticketing models could make the Fringe more financially stable and secure for participants, without making the festival more inaccessible?
- If there were to be boundaries and intentions placed on stakeholders, what can a new set of standards and best practice look like? Examples can be found in Appendix B.
- What is the best way to ensure guidelines are adhered to – how can stakeholders hold each other accountable, share mistakes, and support each other to learn and try again?
- What is the most effective way to engage with stakeholders, to understand their concerns and worries in more detail, and to ensure this work is truly reflective and democratic?

Solutions

Whilst the Steering Group is still in early stages - and may not be able to continue due to funding constraints - it has identified some key areas of work that can offset some of the most important challenges identified:

- Group working – many groups work on the most pertinent issues facing the Fringe in quite a disconnected way. Yet at their core, these problems seem to come from



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similar base causes. Continuing to work collaboratively will be helpful to creating further change.

- Create a timeline with key stakeholders (such as Edinburgh Council, University of Edinburgh, the Fringe Society and some key venues) committing to taking actions to address these challenges over the coming 12 months. Moving forward on this also requires a wide base of support from stakeholder organisations.
- Develop a wider base of participants, venues and audience members who support a better, fairer Fringe, and who support action to make that possible.
- From as wide a support base as possible, create a set of standards and best practice – expanding on the Fringe’s existing blueprint - for the Fringe, outlining the actions required and the restrictions needed to make the festival better.



Appendix A – Organisations involved

These organisations were selected as they have significant knowledge and expertise on topics that we hoped to discuss within the Fringe landscape. Of the seven organisations, five are based in Scotland.

Staging Change - Staging Change is a grassroots artist-led organisation, which supports theatre makers responding to the climate crisis. Their network of over 300 theatre makers and venues works together to overcome the challenges the industry faces in becoming more environmentally sustainable. This network includes major Edinburgh Festival Fringe venues, National Theatre Wales, Farnham Maltings and the house touring network, and RADA.

Fringe of Colour – Founded in 2018, Fringe of Colour is a multi-award-winning initiative dedicated to supporting Black people and People of Colour through its online arts festival, Fringe of Colour Films. Our festival celebrates the creative work of Black, Asian, Indigenous and Latine people in Scotland and around the world, through an online streaming service, publishing platform and podcast series.

Working Class Artist Group – The Working Class Artists Group is a collective of 33 working class artists and producers living in the UK. Founded in 2018, they have been championing and pioneering working class artists across the country for three years.

Birds of Paradise – Birds of Paradise Theatre Company was Scotland’s first touring theatre company employing disabled and non-disabled actors. Since then, they have been led by a number of visionary leaders and in 2012 they became disability-led through the appointment of our current Artistic Directors. At its core, BOP create positive images of inclusion and to encourage participation in the arts.

Activising for Change/BOP – Activising for Change is a freelancer working with Birds of Paradise. They are a queer theatre building tomorrow through the stories we tell ourselves today. To them, protest performance is a form of expression that embodies a love of theatre and passion for change.

Something to Aim For – Something To Aim For (STAF) is a charity devoted to supporting public health and (re)building social fabric by harnessing the playfulness and innovation of the creative industries. Their work centres people at the fringes of the creative industries (and society in general) within opportunities to connect to the institution, develop collaborations to amplify communities, and offer solutions to systemic social problems. One of Their central public projects is the continuing arts, health and well-being programme The Sick of the Fringe (TSOTF).

Power Play – Power Play is an award-winning activist theatre company. They use guerrilla-style immersive theatre and data activism to combat gender inequality in UK theatre. They combine new writing programmes with research, using narrative and numbers (the qualitative and quantitative) to challenge the performing arts industry to diversify the stories it tells.



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Morvern Cunningham (Freelancer and LeithLate) – Morvern Cunningham is a freelance creative based in Edinburgh - specialising in networks and partnership working, with a history of local festival and event organising including founding the arts charity LeithLate. In 2020, they began self-publishing pamphlets on the cultural sector in Edinburgh, culminating most recently with the Future Culture Edinburgh event in September 2021. Morvern is currently Creative Lead at Culture Collective, a network of 26 participatory arts projects across Scotland that supports freelance artists and organisations working within communities.

The Greenhouse Theatre - The Greenhouse is the UK's First-Ever Zero-Waste performance space. Through the power of storytelling, they inspire individuals to take action in response to climate change, making everyday decisions to live more sustainably. They help people build individual emotional connections with their immediate natural environment, transforming the climate crisis from something unfathomable into something they can see, feel, and ultimately, affect.



Appendix B – Suggested Standards

One of the key actions suggested from this work is the creation of a wide-spread and well adhered to set of standards to be implemented across the Fringe ecology. There is still much work to be done to identify exactly what this set of standards would look like. However, we have identified three such standards for venues, and three for participants, to give an idea of what we are talking about:

Venues:

- Commit to having 50% of all shows in the venue audio described.
- Ensure 75% of all venue spaces are wheelchair accessible.
- Sign up to and follow the [anti-racism rider](#).

Participants

- Conduct and publish a carbon footprint for your show.
- Commit to having at least one pay-what-you-can show in your run.
- Sign up to and follow the [anti-racism rider](#).