

Lorem Ipsum

Deep Roots & Open Doors

Building accessibility and
transparency into application
processes

A report by Vivid Roots Collective
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Executive Summary



Introduction

This research is based on focus groups delivered to seven unsuccessful applicants to our recent research and development, HYSTERIA. This R&D was fully funded by the National Lottery via Creative Scotland. We offer more context on our company, our rationale, the project, and our application process in the 'Background' section. Later in this report, we detail the methodology, and group the responses by discussion points in 'Results'; and offer an analysis and recommendations in the 'Conclusion'. For the best understanding of this research, we recommend that you read each section in full. For a less comprehensive overview of the key points, we recommend that you read the 'Background' and 'Conclusion' sections, or skip straight to the 'Conclusion' if you just looking for a snapshot of the research.

Key Points

Application hosts – organisations and independent producers / theatre-makers – are the gatekeepers of most theatre opportunities across the sector. Due to this advantageous position in a competitive industry, it is easy to bypass the needs of the individual artist. This report outlines some ways in which hosts can improve in their delivery of application processes and highlights the importance for host organisations and independent artists in delivering application processes that are accessible and transparent. One of the key concerns of this report is in the transactional nature of the application process and we ask application hosts to consider what it is that they are communicating about their organisation through their approach and attitude towards recruitment processes.

In our recommendations, we have deliberately avoided attempts to distill, simplify, or reduce the asks of our respondents when we asked what

we could do better. We asked for 'blue skies thinking' when the respondents were proposing things that they would like to see improved – ignoring real-world limitations like geography and funding. Despite this, the suggestions offered by the respondents are entirely manageable.

Key Words

Hosts | Organisations and independent theatre-makers hosting application processes.

Emerging / Early-career artists | Artists (in this report, specifically theatre-makers) of any age who are at the beginning of their careers, who may not have had many or any professional opportunities. Vivid Roots defines 'emergence' as a matter of identity as it will be a different experience for everyone; some may be coming from education, some from no formal theatre background, some from other parts of the creative industries, countries, ages, and lifestyles.

Theatre-makers | Those in the creative industries with a specific interest in creating theatre, including, but not limited to: producers, directors, playwrights, performers, designers, production and stage managers, and those with multi-disciplinary and blended practices.

Highlands | Vivid Roots Collective defines the Highlands by its geographical area, not the council district. This extends south to Argyll, north-east to beyond Nairn, and encompasses most of the Cairngorms.

Background


Rationale

Vivid Roots Collective is a Highland-based theatre company creating opportunities for local emerging theatre-makers. To deliver our work and make our creative projects genuinely accessible to emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands and beyond, we need to be constantly assessing the needs of these artists. In July-August 2022, we hosted applications for our first fully-funded R&D; we realised quickly that we were doing things differently to many organisations in our field and wanted to host focus groups with our unsuccessful applicants to capture what their needs are when they are engaging in new opportunities. We hoped that this report would showcase what Vivid Roots is doing well and would show us how to continue to do better so that we and other organisations in the industry could support the emergence of a new generation of creatives.

Context

HYSTERIA was a commission brief for an emerging playwright to develop a play on the theme of contemporary gender inequality in medicine through the lens of hysteria. The application process involved the recruitment of an emerging woman-identifying or non-binary playwright for a full-length play, and three women-identifying or non-binary performers for a 5-day R&D which was successfully delivered at Lyth Arts Centre in September 2022.

We entered the application process with an ethos of accessibility. Working in the Highlands means that we are always aware of the barriers facing emerging artists when accessing opportunities in theatre, specifically during the pandemic. We hosted a six-week application process to allow as much time as possible for people to hear about the



"I think, especially as an emerging artist, it can be quite tough when you're trying to break into it. Being fresh out of drama school when you get to do stuff like that every day, every week, and you're like "this is fantastic" but then you leave and you're like "oh, this is quite rough".

opportunity, as a new company, and to allow artists time to really consider their applications, and to prepare their writing samples and CVs. On the 4th July, we launched applications. The deadline was on the 12th of August with interviews and auditions on the 24th and decisions communicated on the 25th.

Throughout the six weeks, we delivered a support programme, designed to equip our applicants with the tools they would need for their best chance of success. As we were working with artists at the very beginning of their careers, it was important that we offered as much support as we could because they would still be learning how to approach applications. Unfortunately, the support sessions were not well attended, with only two attendees to the writing workshop and no attendees for the Q&As. It became evident that many applicants weren't aware of the sessions or were not able to attend but that the offerings were valued in other ways. We will address this in our recommendations.

Applicants were taken to the application page on the Vivid Roots website where they could read a webpage and pdf application pack, and could choose to fill out a performer, playwright, or video application via links to the corresponding Google Forms. On this page; videos, transcripts, and session plans for the support programme were uploaded after each event. The application pack described the project in depth, offered more context on the questions, and detailed the support available.

You can follow the QR code to see the webpage and the support materials which we have kept for archival purposes in the appendix.

As HYSTERIA was a women-led project with all of our applicants identifying as women or non-binary, the focus groups consisted solely of women artists. Of the seven women participating in the focus groups: two were 25 or younger, and five were over 25 (one over 50).

We will continue to seek feedback on our application processes and already have a robust evaluation model for artists who are successfully contracted for projects.

Other Research

If you are interested in accessing more information about the needs of emerging artists in the theatre industry, you can read Framework Theatre's Building a Framework (2020) here: <https://www.frameworktheatre.com/our-publications>

In 2020, Vivid Roots Collective delivered a report on a sample survey, VRC Survey 1, focusing on the needs of Highland-based artists, which you can read here: <https://vividrootscollective.co.uk/vrc-survey-1-/>

In 2023, we are delivering a broader research project using focus groups to assess the needs of emerging artists in the Highlands. This project is funded by the National Lottery through Creative Scotland's Open Fund. The report from this project will be available on the Vivid Roots website later in 2023.

Interviews which were

This report is based on focus groups and interviews which were delivered online (Zoom) at the end of October 2022. Conversation is an important aspect of research as it allows us to capture the nuance of the applicants' experiences and holds space for anecdotes and tangents which better demonstrate their needs. The limitations of conversational research is that there is no quantitative data to share, and that some of the participants might have felt unable to offer serious criticism of the project. Furthermore, applicants that were unhappy with the application process may have been uninterested in offering their opinions as the focus groups were optional to unsuccessful applicants. The participants make up 27% of the applicants, which is a strong representation, but is not exhaustive of the overall experience of the application process.

Another influence on our decision to host focus groups over surveys was that it is a more personable approach to gathering information. As is clearly demonstrated by the responses, connection and networking are important aspects of the industry, which could be facilitated by the (virtual) face-to-face interviews. As a testament to this, we have since engaged five of the seven participants in further opportunities to connect with the company, by inviting them to an informal creative sharing in November, in paid work on the HYSTERIA Rehearsed Reading, and in our independent freelance work.

The use of an online platform for focus groups was vital considering the majority of applicants were from the central belt. Only one of the participants was from the Highlands, but of all unsuccessful applicants, only three were Highland-based (therefore, the ratio is representative). As our work is available to those across Scotland, it was important that the focus groups were available to all unsuccessful applicants.

Discussion Points

In this section, I break down responses into the four main talking points: what we did well, what we could improve, support, and priorities.

What we did well

Something that is strongly evidenced in the responses is that our application process responded mostly to the themes of: accessibility; communication and transparency; care and support; and being approachable. I have listed the responses under the relevant headings and offer a summary under each of why it is important that we continue to build on these themes.

Accessibility

Accessibility is a massive topic of conversation in the industry at large, reflecting societal shifts to a more tolerant and compassionate community. Hosting accessible application processes is vital to conform to contemporary ethical practices by allowing anyone (despite their background or protected characteristics) to apply and have an equal chance to benefit from the opportunity.

- Hosting online interviews which could be accessible geographically
- Hosting an open recruitment process for a writing commission, which are rarely public and extremely hard to access
- Offering the option of written, postal, video and audio applications; even though all applicants opted for written, they felt reassured by our offering
- Paying for travel to the audition means that we are not excluding those who can't afford to make the journey
- Transparency about the availability of the access budget, not expecting people to ask

"I think it was a very good application process. I think it's definitely one of the best."

Communication and transparency

Communication and transparency are a crucial way to make application processes accessible. Especially in respect of the needs of emerging artists, communication and transparency help the individual to feel confident and held throughout what can be a very vulnerable process. Transparency is one of the most important considerations in this type of work – if you are not being transparent about what you need or what you are offering, you may be guilty of gatekeeping opportunities for people who are already familiar with your work, or misleading applicants into applying for opportunities that may not be right for them.

- A simple email stating that the application had been received and letting the applicant know when they should expect to hear a response; clear and timely communication throughout the application process to update applicants on the status of their application
- The timeline we offered for applications was suitable, reassuring due to the transparency surrounding dates, and we committed to the dates we had announced (we didn't postpone decision-making, despite the tight turnaround)
- Following the deadline for applications, we notified those unsuccessful or successful for the audition and interview stage within five days; following auditions and interviews, we offered final decisions within two days; the quick turnaround means that applicants know where they stand
- The application questions were simple, few in number, and were designed to generate the information that we needed
- One applicant was particularly grateful for our transparency that 'emerging' was not synonymous with 'young'

"It felt that there was a conscious transparency happening."

"I'm always thrilled to get an email, even if it says: 'I'm sorry, you've not been successful this round' because it's so common to not hear anything back."

Care and support

Care and support are the themes that define our processes as Vivid Roots. As our opportunities are targeted towards emerging artists, it is a priority to us that we go the extra mile to ensure that applicants feel cared for. This preserves their confidence and wellbeing at a pivotal stage in their careers.

- For playwright applications, we only asked for a 3-page extract of a play; this was because it is unrealistic to expect emerging playwrights to have the time or resources to write a full-length play. Applicants were also reassured by this that their writing would actually be read and considered.
- Offering a video for how to fill out the application form
- Applicants felt that their applications and writing sample had been read before the interview, and that they weren't repeating themselves. One also appreciated the opportunity to expand on her answers.
- Applicants felt that the generosity in our support offering made them feel confident about the company and our ethos
- Two of the applicants were aware of the support that we offered regarding the live support sessions and one was appreciative of the opportunity to engage with the writing workshop
- One applicant specifically felt that we facilitated space for individuality and creativity in the application process, and that the application questions were preferable to a CV

Being approachable

If we, as an organisation, are approachable, we will be best-placed to deliver and facilitate support to/with artists engaging with us through the application process. Being approachable can make a significant difference for unsuccessful applicants who may wish to apply to future opportunities and to engage with us for their own independent work.

"I write letter after letter after letter trying to prove myself, and it becomes really disheartening, but when I'm being questioned like an artist rather than a product, that

- The interview was comfortable and relaxed; applicants felt that they could talk organically and honestly because they knew what we expected of them; it was specifically noted that receiving interview questions in advance helped the applicants feel comfortable and confident
- With our unsuccessful emails, we introduced an open door policy for artists to be in touch for support and networking in the future, this was well-received
- When applicants emailed to indicate that they would be unable to attend the support sessions, they felt that we still made ourselves available to them for any questions they might have

What we could improve

The core areas for improvement in the application process were issues of communication, support, and care. Many of what applicants would like to see improved are in more expansive changes to the application in general, which will be described in the following section. This section focuses on the criticisms specific to this process as we delivered it.

"I really have appreciated the post-unsuccessful engagement [...] I just think some other times, when I've received an email saying: "you don't get this because..." – well, first, they don't usually say "because A, B, C", they just say "you didn't get this" [...] There was a little bit of care, which is what I felt with you."

As this section focus on criticism, for each heading I have summarised how we plan to respond to the pitfalls in this process.

Communication

Most of these concerns are issues of transparency. We can do better in future to be more specific about our capacity (all directors are part-time, and the Producer and Artist Liaison were both already over capacity with the project); our priorities; and the project. We will work on our wording in future to reassure applicants that we mean what we say, and to define more exactly how our priorities will impact their potential for success.

- One applicant noted that it took a long time for us to get in touch for further feedback
- Some applicants felt that with a few of the questions, they were trying to second-guess what we were looking for from the

responses; specifically, one applicant felt unsure about our question asking: 'Why/how do you identify as an emerging artist?'

- A few of the applicants specifically felt unsure about how seriously we are considering non-Highland artists
- One applicant asked for more information on the creative theme that we were exploring as they felt it would have better facilitated relevant responses

Support

In the future, we plan to announce the application launch ahead of the launch date. Included in this pre-launch communication will be prominent advertisement of the support opportunities and dates. We will also increase the delivery of in-person online sessions, offering morning and evening sessions to catch as many applicants as possible. In the 'Recommendations', I talk more about limits and the support programme.

- Crucially, the majority of applicants were not aware of the support sessions. One does not use social media, but most found out about the opportunity or the sessions too late
- One of the applicants had attempted a video application but felt that three minutes was too short and that they could better meet the question criteria in the written form; another applicant felt a general lack of confidence in submitting a video application, unsure whether it was something we were willing to receive

Care

In the 'Recommendations', I suggest methods that would break up the 6-week application process to relieve the pressure on the calendars of freelance artists. We also propose an abolishment of many traditional application limits; offering applicants alternative ways to apply will combat the expectation set around forms and will allow applicants the opportunity to apply by submitting documents, which they may feel more comfort in.

- While most applicants benefitted from the 6-week application process, one felt that it meant a lot of time not knowing if they need to keep that R&D week available and that they feel pressure to turn down other opportunities if they came along
- One applicant felt that the Google Form made them worry that they would lose their progress as there wasn't an option to save the form

Other kinds of support

The responses in this section are suggestions that would support successful applications in the future; I have divided them into: connection, which is a collection of requests that support networking between peers and with the company; and access, which is a collection of the specific and simple ways that we can make the support offerings more accessible. The responses in this section will be the focus of the recommendations in this report so I will be saving my reflections for this chapter.

Connection

- Peer support in the application process, and spaces to share work
 - The opportunity to meet new people and to build a community around the application process
 - The opportunity to meet the team in advance of the application or interview
 - The opportunity to ask questions and get quick responses from a team member throughout the application timeline
 - A workshop option for performers which introduces applicants to the style of the director, the themes of the project, and the team in general
- "So this idea of actually hosting something together, it will make the application process a pleasure, and how pleasing the world will be if we actually apply for jobs as a pleasure."*
- "Of course if you know someone then you immediately feel more relaxed, or it immediately feels like a door that could open, even if it doesn't open that time."*

Access

- Our final question: 'Why are you interested in this opportunity to work with Vivid Roots Collective?' could be split into two questions, one which asks about the company specifically, and one which asks about the opportunity specifically.
- Help filling out the application – a contact at a middle-stage who can read the application and ask more questions
- Less specific word counts and time limits
- Having a note-of-interest option to learn more ahead of applying

- Running the same event at different times to reach as many people as possible
- Recordings of all live sessions
- Examples of how others identify as 'emerging'

Priorities

In this section, I have collated the responses that signify what is important to applicants when they are engaging in an application process.

- That the opportunity is transactional or reciprocal
- Opportunities exploring forms or themes that the applicant finds interesting and that suits their practice, and seeing that the organisation or team are passionate about what they are offering.

"That an organisation thinks as much about what they are giving as what they are receiving; and what they are giving might be very simple, it might be as simple as reading the application or giving feedback or providing materials; but what is it that we can do to meet in the middle?"
- The opportunity to make new connections, expand their networks, and get to know the organisation
- Accessibility: the option to apply in the way that suits the applicant best; simple application processes that don't ask applicants to jump through too many hoops; open door policies that allow applicants to ask questions before applying
- A bit of care: an email to say their application has been received, feedback provided without applicants having to ask for it and further feedback offered, clarity on the project and the criteria; safe spaces in interviews, auditions, and on the project; communication throughout the process

Conclusion

Analysis

There is a lot to consider in response to the outcome of these focus groups. The most striking finding is the allusion by most of the focus group respondents that the industry at large doesn't meet their needs. Respondents offer sentiments like: 'I never expect things like this' for support provision, care, and transparency; painting a very poor picture of the current landscape of opportunities for emerging and early-career artists. Participants also used words like 'cattle' and 'dehumanising' to describe their experiences. We were shocked to discover that, through our first fully-funded project, Vivid Roots is offering a stronger ethos of care, support and transparency than other, more established, organisations. While we acknowledge the bias in this research of artists who are willing to engage in the focus groups, we feel encouraged by the predominantly positive experiences of this application process and 'post-unsuccessful engagement', and hope that we can continue to offer model application process that are accessible to theatre-makers at all stages of their careers.

Another finding that emerged from this research is in the transactional nature of application processes. There are two aspects of this. The first is for organisations and independent artists: you should be aware that potential applicants are learning something about you through the application process. The host's attitude towards transparency, EDI, care and support in the application process inevitably leaves an impression on the applicant about the the ethos of the host. The second aspect of this is that hosts are the ones in control of the opportunities across the industry. More than one of the respondents of this research indicated that 'a job is a job', regardless of the ethics of the organisation. Due to the highly competitive nature of the industry, some artists feel that there isn't space for being particular about the ethos of the company they are working with. With this in mind, I believe that organisations have an ethical responsibility to be transparent and accessible in their approach to application processes.

Partly in relation to this point, this research emphasised to Vivid Roots

the importance of open recruitment processes. Playwright applicants in particular marked how unusual it was for commissions to be made accessible by application. For our part, we will be continuing to make as many creative roles accessible by application to contribute to a culture of diversity and inclusion in the creative industries. Without open recruitment processes, it is extremely difficult for emerging theatre-makers – the next generation of the creative industries – to access opportunities and develop their portfolios and practice.

In the vein of the transactional nature of applications, we will leave you with these buzzwords which the focus group respondents used to describe their priorities: feedback, comfort, care, feasible, inclusive, exciting, open, transactional, connections, flexible, curiosity, passion, and to be seen. Our applicants aren't asking for much. They are asking that: hosts are transparent about selection criteria and the project; hosts offer feedback for applications, which allows the applicant to develop; hosts treat the applicant and the process with care and foster space for individuality; and that hosts offer opportunities with passion, curiosity, and openness. This is evident in their responses to 'what we did well'; identifying feedback, being approachable, geographical accessibility, clear communication of the project, transparent criteria, and a strong offering of application support, as strengths of our process.

“and I don't say this very often – but thank you for that lovely rejection email”

Recommendations

As stated in the summary, we have tried our best not to distill the asks of the respondents into something more traditional or manageable. Here we have listed some solutions to the needs and requests of the applicants to implement in future application processes. These recommendations talk to the applicants' priorities detailed above.

The Essentials

This is a list of all the basic parts of the application process and ways this research has indicated that hosts can do better to meet applicant needs and priorities.

- **Word, page, and time limits:** We recommend that, where possible, hosts avoid specific limitations on the number of words,

pages, and the amount of time applicants have to respond to your application. Applicants find limits challenging in a number of ways; more openness in the length of responses will allow applicants to express themselves as they see fit. If you are worried that the response may exceed your capacity to assess applications, consider planning extra time and budget to give the appropriate amount of attention to each application.

- **Dates:** Transparency about dates is a crucial part of the application process. Our respondents were reassured by the access to this information and, specifically, were complimentary about our commitment to delivering the decisions and the work on the dates given.

Another aspect concerning dates is that some emerging artists will be new to managing their time as a freelancer and may feel uncertain about their own commitment to the project, which may be months away from the application launch. A simple statement to reassure emerging artists that they should let the team know if they have been successful for other opportunities in the meantime will help encourage them to keep applying to more work.

Something that we plan to do in the future is to advertise the support programme and application launch in advance so that we can expand our chances of catching more people and improve access to live support sessions.

- **Criteria:** Being transparent about the criteria for the application, audition and interview upfront is important to making sure that your application process is delivered ethically. Using broad, abstract, or ambiguous language to define selection criteria means that you are gatekeeping opportunities in a way that is inaccessible to people who don't already know your organisation's tastes and preferences.

Be as clear as possible about what you want from your applicants. If you are asking application questions, make sure that you use plain English and that you are asking them specifically what you want to know. Don't make artists have to guess what you want from them.

Decide in advance what your selection criteria and priorities

are and advertise these upfront. If you haven't asked for specific information at the application stage, you can't assess the applications on it.

Our respondents who had attended the playwright interviews all commented on the comfort and enjoyment that they experienced with their interview. Some of them were specifically complimentary of our decision to tell them their interview questions in advance so that they could prepare. We recommend that all companies are transparent about their interview questions upfront.

A question that tripped up one of our respondents was our question asking about their emergence. They felt that we might have been looking for something specific which we didn't disclose, but we actually just wanted to know that people are engaging with their emergence and the questions a good signifier to potential applicants who hadn't read the application pack that, if they weren't emerging, it wasn't for them. To help artists answer their question if they haven't considered it before in depth, we will have videos of emerging artists that we have already worked with describing their experiences and their identity as 'emerging' alongside the application process.

- **Feedback:**

It is vital that you provide your unsuccessful applicants with feedback, especially if your opportunity is targeted towards emerging artists. This is the best way for emerging artists to develop their skills in applying to new work.

For us, we recognise that 'unsuccessful' emails are an opportunity for us to learn, just as much as the applicant. With any 'unsuccessful email', we will include a link to an online form which asks for feedback about the application process so that the applicant can offer anonymous criticism. We will be adding new reflections to our website under Reports > Applications for other hosts to review and extract some learning.

The Extras

If you are considering offering a support programme alongside your application processes, these are some suggestions of where to start; providing opportunities that are valuable to applicants for their application and beyond.

- **Open spaces:** Offering online spaces for potential applicants to meet the team, network with other potential applicants, to get to know the project, and to get to know the company better. With this support, applicants can make a better application that is more tailored towards the project; they will also be more confident at an interview or audition if they know the team. Emerging artists are already aware that networking is a vital part of accessing opportunities in the industry, so if applicants have the opportunity to meet new people and learn new skills, they will still have taken something valuable away from the experience if they are unsuccessful in their application. Building a community of support and encouragement around application processes means that emerging artists are more likely to apply again to you and to others.

If you are hosting a **play commission**, we recommend hosting a writing workshop which introduces playwrights to the themes and allows them the space to be creative, get to know the themes, and get to know the face of a team member. A key consideration when targeting commissions to emerging playwrights is that it is unreasonable to ask your applicants for a full-length play; doing so makes the opportunity inaccessible to emerging playwrights who have to work full-time, caring responsibilities, or other barriers that prevent them from taking the time to write a full-length play.

If you are hosting a call for **performers**, we recommend hosting a practical workshop that allows performers or other creatives to get to know the company, your particular style of working, and the project themes.

It is also important to establish open spaces day-to-day

throughout the application and audition/interview process so that applicants see that you are available to answer questions – whether this be drop-in video or phone calls, an open-door statement for emails, or an FAQ page on your website for people to post questions to a community. You should think carefully about how you make yourself available.

“The café idea is beautiful too; the idea of being able to come together and share and help one another is perfect and we need to do more of it, I think, to draw on everyone’s strengths.”

- **Application stages:**

Some of our respondents suggested that application stages would help them as it would mean that they are better informed about whether they need to keep the project timeline available over other opportunities, and it gives them the opportunity to expand on their application.

“The café idea is beautiful too; the idea of being able to come together and share and help one another is perfect and we need to do more of it, I think, to draw on everyone’s strengths.”

A further support offering that was requested by our respondents is the idea of an ‘application doctor’ someone, not on the assessing panel, who can answer questions about the application process and who can proof-read the applicant’s submission before it goes to the assessment panel.



Appendices

Appendix A: Transcripts

Our focus group respondents had a lot to say. To keep the page count down on this report, we have moved all of their transcripts online. You can see them here: <https://vividrootscollective.co.uk/deep-roots-open-doors/>



Appendix B: Application Form

Our full application page, including links to the Google Forms with the application questions, is available here: <https://vividrootscollective.co.uk/hysteria-applications/>



Lorem Ipsum

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