

# Studio Practice Fund Part Two: Discussion April 2021

## Studio Practice Fund Discussion

This paper is a companion commentary to the findings laid out in the Acme Studio Practice Fund Analysis 2021. The contents of this paper reference the analysis report as well as previous Acme partnered research.



**I realised that having  
my space  
to work  
was absolutely  
necessary.**

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Precarity, uncertainty and instability have long threatened artists' living and working conditions, careers and livelihoods, impacting on the overall quality of art practice outcomes (McRobbie, 2015). In July 2020, when the House of Lords warned that the COVID-19 pandemic presented **"the biggest threat to the UK's cultural infrastructure, institutions and workforce in ageneration"** (House of Lords, 2020) there was understandable concern about what the future would hold for artists. As impact studies begin to emerge, they offer a worrying glimpse into the complex and interrelated threats that artists now face and which demand innovative coping strategies. This complexity is bewildering not only to artists, but also to the organisations that hope to support them through these times. Many organisations lack clarity in how to best assign resources and offer help.

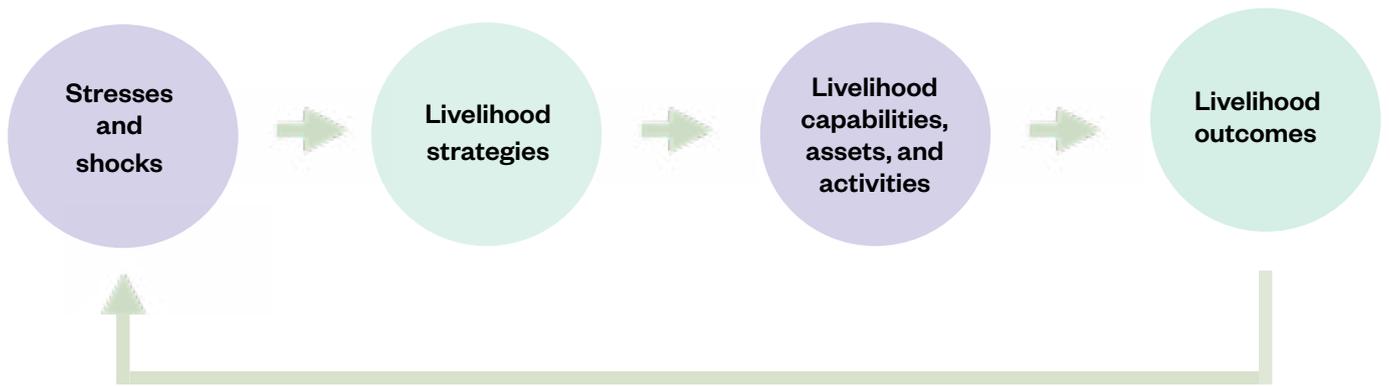
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### The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

While a crisis of this magnitude is highly unusual in the UK, countries around the world have experienced many complex crises during the past decades. This has required their citizens to devise innovative coping strategies, and for aid organisations to develop reliable models to assist in assessing the best methods of intervention. If we are to respond appropriately to the current crises in the UK, it is expedient that we **import models from this well researched international context and adapt them for local use.**

One such model is the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) (DFID, 1999). With minor adaptations, the SLF offers a rigorous tool for assessing the impact of the pandemic on artists' livelihoods in the UK context.

Because the COVID-19 pandemic is such a new event, the data can seem overwhelming and the themes within it unclear. Using a tried and tested model can bring some order, in this case it can help to **build a picture of how artists are sustaining their practice, the shocks and threats the pandemic poses, and the strategies that they employ. We can then identify where the most significant impacts are and the most effective ways that we and the sector might support artists.**



**Figure 1: The Sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF)**

The SLF model is very simple. It places the household at the core of the livelihood. The members of the household possess a mix of assets and capabilities that can be used to produce outcomes that create value in order to support and sustain the household.

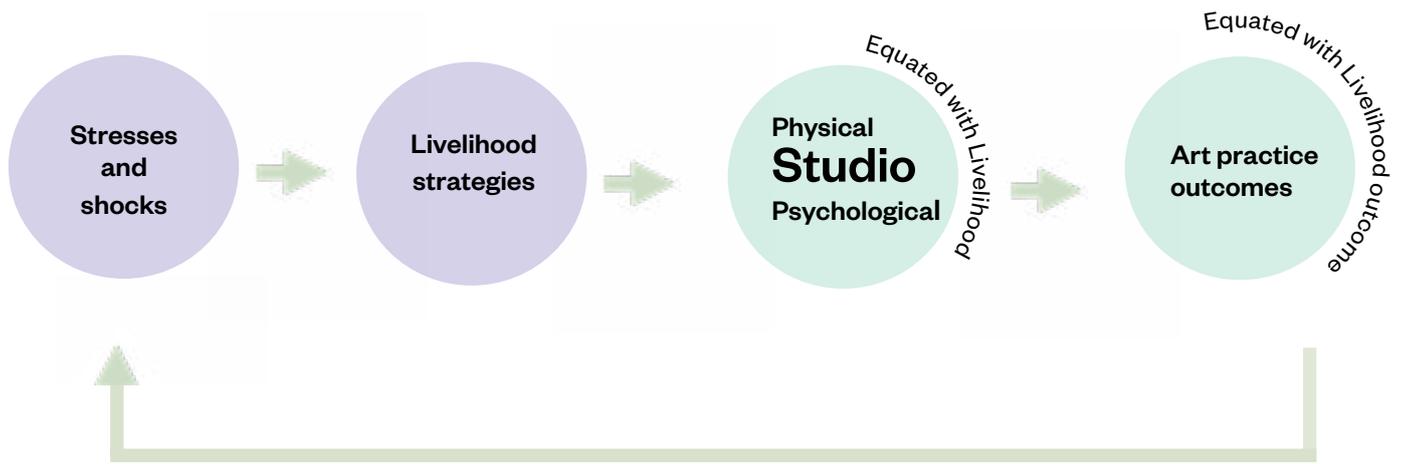
Households exist in both a social and economic context which from time to time exposes them to shocks and stresses that threaten their existence. **To survive these stressors, the household members must develop livelihood strategies that cushion the household from these shocks.** The success of these strategies will determine the sustainability of the household and their livelihood.

**International applications of the SLF in 2020**

Livelihood & environmental impact of <b>Gendered Forest Access</b> and Use - Kenya	<b>Post disaster tourism</b> development - Indonesia	Mobile application for <b>women street vendors</b> - Cape Town	Training opportunities for entrepreneurs - rural India
<b>Sustainable land management</b> - Zimbabwe	The livelihoods of <b>waste pickers</b> - Bangladesh	Food security, labour migration, and <b>natural resource use</b> - rural South Africa	Sustainability of the <b>Shea industry</b> - Ghana.

**The Artists Livelihood Framework**

With minor adjustments, the SLF can be adapted to fit studio artists' livelihoods. Here, 'the household' would become the artist-in-studio, with physical and psychological elements. The 'livelihood outcomes' are equated to the artists' art practice outcomes, and the 'stresses and shocks' that impact on the artist livelihood are equated to those that the pandemic exposes them to. Finally, the 'household strategies' correspond to the strategies that artists devise in an effort to sustain their livelihood and practice. These can be represented in an adapted model.



**Figure 2: The Artists' Livelihood Model adapted from the SLF**

### Centrality of the studio to the artist livelihood

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My studio is essential to my sculptural practice. Clay and plaster are primary materials amongst many others, and I need to use my kiln.

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Without this space I would not be able to make my living or continue my art practice.

It is widely accepted that for artists who pursue a studio-based practice, the studio is at the heart of their livelihood. Cobey (2007, cited in Fierro Touche, 2020) indicates that **artists' studios function as spaces for thinking, creating, researching, exhibiting, storing work and meeting people**, among other purposes. It is, in a sense, a hub from which the artists' livelihoods emanate in a range of ways. It is therefore unsurprising that, in artist responses, it is consistently referred to and forms a foundation upon which artists describe their experiences and struggles during the pandemic.

In responses **artists seem to conceptualise their studio as a blend of the physical and psychological**, i.e. more than merely a bricks and mortar phenomenon. This is an important distinction requiring closer consideration.

## The physical studio

Our respondents indicated that, during the pandemic, the physical bricks and mortar space of the studio was valued because it offered a place that could physically hold and contain the tools and materials essential to the artists' livelihoods. They described this physicality as performing a holding or containing function that is **not only a space for the creation of artworks, but also a space that can safely house their hazardous materials, accommodate large artworks or equipment, and store diverse materials.** As such, the space needs to be liveable; Loftus (2015) indicates that the stereotypical artists building, that emphasises creativity, "whether residential (unwanted housing stock) industrial (warehouses and factories), institutional (old town halls and fire stations) or agricultural (barns, stable blocks, silos)" is not the artists' first choice in physical design. Rather, they prefer physical characteristics which contribute to the capacity of the studio to hold them physically. Loftus (ibid, p.105) states that these include "robustness, flexibility, affordability, adequate daylighting and practical size."

While the physicality of the studio, and its design and properties, are crucial to the artist-in-studio being able to produce artworks, it is all too often considered to be sufficient to their livelihoods. Our findings indicate that **a range of psychological factors are equally as important as the physical studio.** Sadly, these are often overlooked in the estimation of how best to support studio practice.

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## The artist-in-studio

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I have been unwilling to use public transport... so resorted to using a rental car to and from the studio, at a much increased cost that is not sustainable.

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After close to 20 years on your waiting list, I desperately don't want to lose my studio.

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Normally I am fit and strong but I have had major issues with my spine since March, which really compromised my mobility. I managed to walk to studio most days but I have been in a lot of pain.

At the most crude level, the most important changeable psychological factor to consider is the artist themselves. Studios do not create art outcomes without the presence of the artists, and very often, because of the variability of human nature, the characteristics of the physical space does not offer any clue as to what art outcomes will be produced there. As Harvey (2015, p. 28) puts it, "what actually happens within each studio is entirely unpredictable, thus what comes into a studio building as 'material' and, once transformed, comes out as 'the work' is similarly so." Elsewhere, Ellard (2015) states that, "**an argument... that absolutely ties the need for a studio solely to material processes is missing the point of what a studio is, or does.**", p. 41.

In data gathered, artists constantly wove their presence into descriptions of their studios, communicating the strong symbiosis between artist and studio. **The artist-in-studio is a unique combination of enmeshed physical and psychological parts.** Before the pandemic, **this need for a studio was evident by the length of time that artists were willing to spend on the Acme studio waiting list, as well as the high proportion of income artists are willing to spend on sustaining studio rent.** During the pandemic, **it has been emphasised by the great lengths that they would go to access and be in/with their studios,** often undertaking lengthy and difficult travel.

## The psychological aspects of the studio

Artists having access to a physically suitable studio is therefore essential to the artist in studio. In addition, our respondents emphasised the need for an environment in which they could focus on their work and to achieve a state within their studio that facilitated a creative frame of mind. This is interesting, as respondents reported their ability to focus and be creative as relying on the correct physical and non-physical conditions. The design and layout of the physical studio can, to an extent, support this. In designing Acme's High House studios, in 2013 for example, specific thought was given "to engendering a sense of common purpose, through artists being aware of each other's presence without compromising the privacy that they require." (p. 32).

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Like many people the free thinking optimistic frame of mind necessary for creativity has largely deserted me.

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[Lockdown related caring] pressures have affected my mental health and my ability to focus on my art practice.

Artists indicated that focus and creativity exists somewhat independently of the physical studio, some reported losing focus and creativity even when their correctly laid out physical studios were still accessible. This was put down to a feeling of concern and worry about the impact of the pandemic on a range of issues, not least of which was the financial sustainability of their studio. **The psychological state of focusing and being creative is therefore a fragile one**, and represents a site in which the pandemic can enter into and undermine the artists' livelihoods.

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## Continuity and the artistic frame of mind

Fierro Touche (2020) claims that feelings of precarity, amongst artists, are not only shaped by objectively precarious circumstances, but by subjective perceptions of one's own condition. This was echoed in our responses, in which **artists indicated that concern and worry arose from imaginings about the future and perceptions of the current situation**. This means that **even when artists have a secure and suitable physical studio, their livelihoods can still be undermined by their personal perceptions of what will happen in the future**.

Artists commonly reported concerns about the long term sustainability of their studios but **discomfort could be tolerated in the present if the future looked certain**. The opposite was also evident, but to a lesser extent, i.e. that artists who were secure in the present worried about what the future might hold. Of course, financial precarity was a major concern amongst a range of threats that artists faced (whether in 'reality' or in perception). Fierro Touche (ibid, p. 24) suggests that precarity in this respect leads to further negative outcomes, including uncertainty, insecurity, a feeling of instability, inconsistent work patterns, and disruption of practice. Hannigan (2018) adds to this by stating that a sense of continuity **"...improved self-esteem, helped secure professional identity and produced feelings of stability"**, p. 39. Precarity and having an insecure sense of self were both identified as areas commonly affecting our respondents' working lives. This finding is particularly significant when one considers that London is home to the largest number of creative workers in the UK (Kretschmer et al., Hannigan, p. 1) and that **gentrification of the city means that safe and continuous spaces are increasingly hard to find** (Harvey, 2015).

## Art practice outcomes

In the right circumstances, when the physical studio is able to contain the artist's practice, when the artist is able to be in the studio, and when continuity is assured (giving rise to a focused and creative frame of mind), the artist's livelihood results in art practice outcomes. **Art practice outcomes are, therefore, a kind of barometer for the health of the livelihood**, and the ways in which art practice outcomes are impacted upon can alert us to problems at a more core level. To the artist, art practice outcomes are of course important because they provide value that feeds back into the overall livelihood and thereby assures sustainability. The respondents referred to a number of art practice outcomes that were being impacted upon by the pandemic (see Part 1, Plot 2: Percentage of Art Practice Outcomes).

Art practice outcomes contribute value, firstly, in the form of income, assuring payment of rent, and the purchase of art and other physical essentials. But our respondents indicated other, less tangible values that arise. Procedural knowledge (how to sustain the livelihood and face environmental threats), a sense of accomplishment and worth (adding to the core capacities of the artist), and a willingness to 'take chances' are all important additional forms of value that arise from outcomes.

**Protecting art practice outcomes is therefore of vital importance to the recovery and sustainability of artist livelihoods during and after the pandemic.** This is more than financial support. **The institutions and organisations that form essential spaces for artist outcomes need to be reactivated if any degree of livelihood sustainability is to be achieved.**

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## Threats, stresses and shocks

So far we have largely focused on the factors that contribute to the livelihood in isolation, out of context. **The ALF locates the livelihood within the pandemic as a threat context**, with stresses and shocks that work toward disrupting and undermining artists in their attempts to sustain their livelihoods. Our respondents clarified a range of threats that they face under the pandemic (Part 1, Plot 1). **Compromises to art practice outcomes was seen by respondents to be the biggest threat that they face.** Our model has, however, allowed us to properly locate art practice outcomes as an important end result of the livelihood rather than a threat in itself. Following this (and the biggest threat) is financial difficulties. Once again, this can be understood with reference to our model. Finances are of course vital to the sustainability of the physical studio and, by extension, to the artist-in-studio. But the plot suggests that there are a range of threats that combine and interrelate in complex and as yet unexamined ways. Acme intend to undertake more robust research into this area in order to better understand the landscape of vulnerability and the strategies that artists employ in response. In addition, the qualitative responses have revealed that there are a range of psychological threats that have not been adequately researched. These, too, are of interest to Acme, moving forward.

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## Livelihood strategies

The livelihood strategies are an area that warrants future exploration, as it is very likely that a clearer understanding of how these are navigated by artists will reveal new opportunities for impactful support. This will have to be a carefully designed study, as each artist's situation is nuanced to their specific and personal circumstances. Fierro Touche (2020) states that "...each individual's precarious experience [is] a different one. One that can, therefore, be ameliorated in equally different ways and by different stabilising forces." In the context of the pandemic, **there are potentially as many coping strategies as there are artists.** Future research will have to identify and describe common themes. Attempting to describe livelihood strategies as reported by our respondents is beyond the scope of this report.

## The studio and mental and emotional distress during the pandemic

Worry and concern are, as discussed, a nuanced threat to livelihoods that are difficult to quantify. Our data, however, suggested that at times **the psychological impact of the pandemic can go beyond worry and concern and cause mental and emotional distress**. Some artists reported a reactivation or exacerbation of pre-existing mental health conditions, due to the extra pressures put upon them by the pandemic. Other artists indicated that their mental health had been affected for the first time. Both groups, reported that **these experiences had undermined their productive frame of mind, their ability to successfully be in the studio, and their artist livelihood**.

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My motivation and ability to focus have been significantly negatively impacted by the pandemic.

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My only income is from selling work through exhibitions [their subsequent cancellation] has created further anxiety and financial worry.

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My mental health has suffered from the increased demands and precariousness of the jobs, I've had some serious bouts of anxiety.

Amongst instances of emotional distress reported, anxiety was most frequently described in artist's responses and to varying degrees of intensity. Artists described **anxiety as being extremely corrosive to the psychological aspects of the studio**, i.e, their focus and creativity were lost. Impacts on motivation, mood and productivity were also reported. These two symptoms (anxiety and lack of motivation) echo the mental health categories of anxiety disorders and depression. The number of artists affected, the extent of the impact, and the support they may require are potentially a major challenge moving forward. Anxiety and a lack of motivation create a vicious cycle which impacts both on artists' ability to maintain a productive frame of mind but also on their ability to strategise and protect livelihoods from the shocks and stresses of the pandemic. Mental and emotional distress, therefore represents an extremely destructive threat that erodes artists' livelihoods on two fronts.

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## Mental health and the studio: the studio as support

When under threat or in circumstances in which artists feel that their focus and creativity is compromised, the studio may represent a site of struggle. But it may also be a source of comfort and support wellbeing in the face of the pandemic. The studio may provide a space for escape and inspiration for artists to help them cope in worrying times.

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[Life] has left me in a continual state of struggle. My studio is the only escape I have when I can get there and without it I would be crushed.

When I am in the studio it acts as a huge release and positive effect on my wellbeing. and working towards my goals and objectives gives me hope and positivity away from my current financial stresses and mental health issues.

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The studios are a big expense for me, but it's helped me so much mentally over the course of the pandemic.

## When the studio sustains the artist

The studio is able to be more than a neutral containing space for the artist. It is potentially able to hold and protect the artist during unstable times. Our respondents reported that being in the studio allowed them to work through their anxieties and fears, and the very real experience of precarity in the face of the pandemic. For many, the studio became a different and much needed space, to which they brought their vulnerabilities, and in which **they were held and sustained by their studios**. This completed a **sympiosis of sustainability**, in which at times **the artists sustained their studio** and at others, **the studio sustained the artists**.

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## Conclusion

The various points raised in this discussion paper are the beginning of a conversation born from data gathered from artists whose livelihoods have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. A broader sample of information from artists not specifically seeking financial support would result in better understanding of the pandemic impact.

An important theme emerging from this research is the central importance of the 'psychological space' of the studio, in artists' livelihoods. Without this, the physical studio remains mere bricks and mortar, lacking the creativity and focus that are the elusive but vital catalysts in the production of art outcomes. It is crucial that there is an understanding of the psychosocial factors that regulate and govern the ebb and flow of creativity and focus. As our research has begun to show, these factors are complex and nuanced with artists creating strategies that are unique to their specific lived experience. But these need to be researched and understood; glib formulations of the psychosocial in studio provision will only result in unsatisfactory outcomes and less than optimal studios and studio supports. The psychological relevance of the studio extends beyond these intrinsic livelihood aspects to the promotion and maintenance of mental health amongst artists.

The stresses of the pandemic, and the associated lockdown, have made it possible for us to gain a glimpse of the therapeutic role of the studio for artists regarding mental health and coping. Artists regularly indicated how their studios were essential to their being able to withstand the psychological fallout from the pandemic. Some indicated that without their studios, they found themselves slipping toward mental and emotional distress. How these mechanisms work requires further investigation. Finally, this study makes a strong case for the use of a multidisciplinary approach when trying to make sense of the pandemic and its impact on artists. It has shown that, with some creativity and insight, existing tried and tested models can be adapted and made relevant and effective. The SLF has proved to be a very useful starting point in our efforts to create an appropriate framework for understanding the importance and impact of artist studio provision. It is, however, only a starting point from which Acme intend to develop a greater understanding and improved modelling in the future.

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All artist quotations have been taken directly from Studio Practice Fund application forms.