



Beyond the Stage

Understanding the Benefits of Outdoor Arts, Circus and Spectacle in Scotland

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

About the Authors

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Acknowledgements

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Thanks to all the Articulation partners, members, stakeholders and networks who were involved in the focus group sessions and who took part in our survey.

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Introduction

This report has been commissioned by Articulation to address long-standing gaps in the policy understanding of outdoor arts, circus and spectacle by researching and documenting the current nature and scope of this work within Scotland's cultural landscape.

The findings are intended to raise the policy profile of the practices explored as a vital, multi-skilled and uniquely accessible sector, enabling Articulation to advocate more effectively on their behalf. The report highlights how working in the public realm creates opportunities to engage broad and diverse audiences and to maximise public access to the arts. It calls for this contribution to be properly recognised at the highest level and reflected in the policies of the Scottish Government and Scotland's arts, events and education agencies.

Full Report

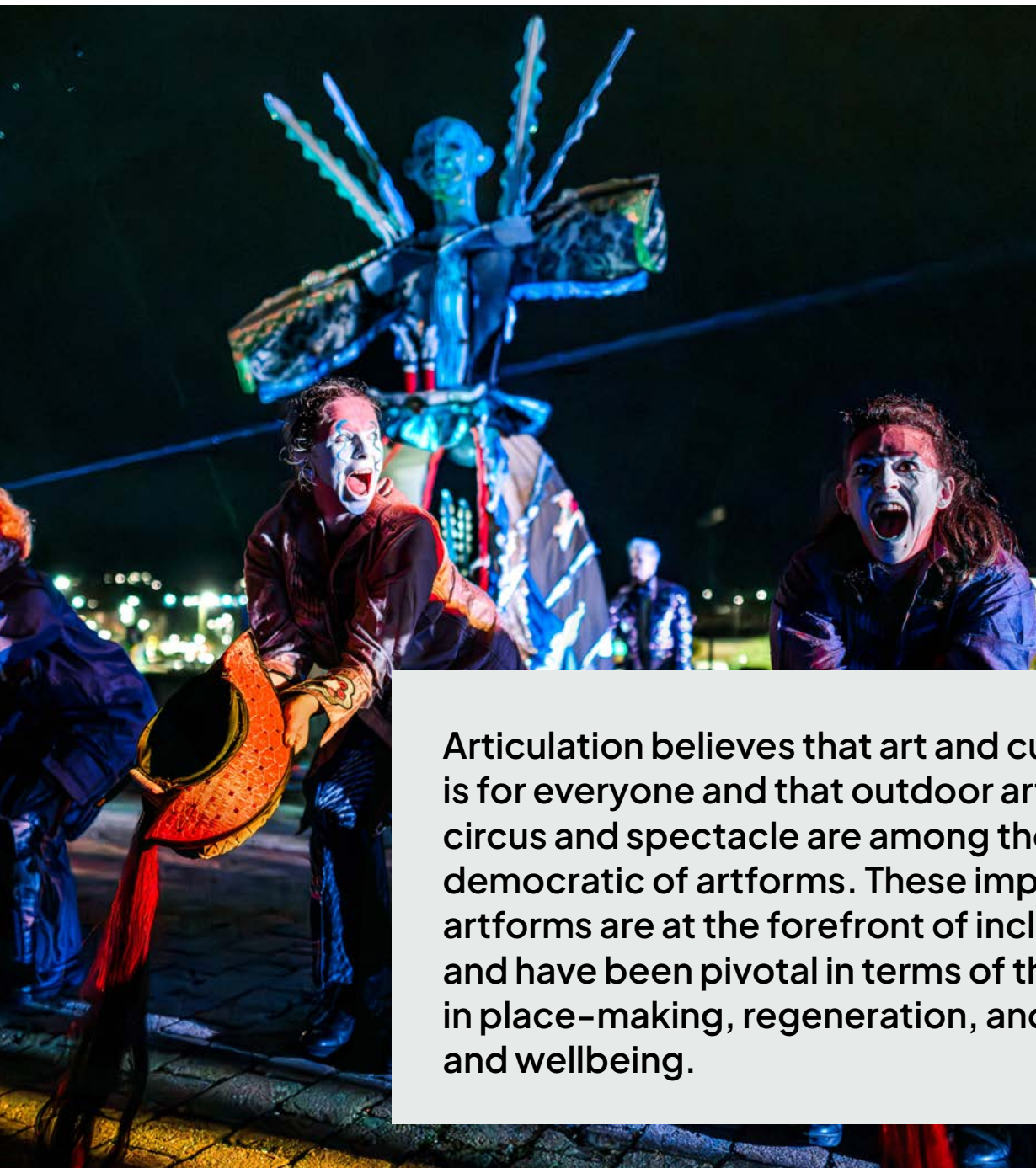
Full findings from this study, including testimony and data from the sector, can be found in a companion document, *'Beyond the Stage: Understanding the Benefits of Outdoor Arts, Circus and Spectacle in Scotland - FULL REPORT'*.



Sail Loft by Oceanallover at Galoshans Street Party October 2024. Photo: Brian Hartley

About Articulation

Articulation is Scotland's network agency for outdoor arts, circus and spectacle. Its main charitable objective is to support the advancement of the arts and culture, by their promotion, improvement and encouragement of physical performance – a term used to cover physical theatre, outdoor performance and circus. Articulation does this principally through research, advocacy, and strategic development activities.



Articulation believes that art and culture is for everyone and that outdoor arts, circus and spectacle are among the most democratic of artforms. These important artforms are at the forefront of inclusivity and have been pivotal in terms of their role in place-making, regeneration, and arts and wellbeing.

What do we mean by OACS?

Outdoor Arts

Outdoor arts is often used interchangeably with the terms 'street arts', 'arts in the public realm', 'site-specific art' and 'public art'. However, the term also includes creativity taking place in nature and within, or incorporating, landscape. These creative interventions take art beyond institutions, bringing it into the public realm and outside of formally designated cultural venues, seeking to connect with all people irrespective of social, economic, or educational background.

Circus

An ancient artform, circus has evolved to bring together acrobatic equestrian skills, clowns, jugglers, tightrope walkers and musical performance. Contemporary circus or 'cirque nouveau' emerged in the 1960s with a focus on artistic excellence and narrative, blending elements of dance, mime, and physical theatre skills.

Spectacle

Spectacle is a term used to refer to large-scale events that involve a mass-audience. This may include procession, dance, music, fireworks and audience participation. Such events are often staged outdoors as part of a wider festival, occasion or celebration.

Understanding & Usage of OACS

Throughout this report, **OACS** is used as a collective term for **outdoor arts, circus and spectacle**. It is a pragmatic abbreviation that brings these interconnected practices together while acknowledging that the sector is diverse and that this study cannot encompass every form or expression within it.



What links OACS as a sector?

This study is the first to examine OACS as a connected sector of practice in Scotland.

OACS **activities frequently overlap in practice**, with artists often drawing on more than one form and presenting a wide range of artforms within their work.

OACS artists share many **training and infrastructure needs**, particularly around developing and sustaining specialist skills.

OACS work is often **presented beyond conventional arts venues** and attracts broad audiences, including people who may not typically engage with the arts.

OACS artforms **struggle to fit within mainstream funding categories**, requiring practitioners to apply for support in areas that do not closely reflect their work. This narrows their chances of success and can limit the scope and ambition of their projects.

Outdoor arts, circus and spectacle should each be considered distinctive areas of artistic practice in their own rights. However, to reflect Articulation's advocacy remit, this study approaches them together as a single sector and makes the case for their collective recognition.



Why is this study needed?

The work of this sector has limited policy visibility with much of its activity happening seemingly under the radar due to much OACS work being unfunded, un-ticketed and free to access in public spaces. OACS work tends to fall 'in between' the established mainstream artforms within the existing funding structures, with artists telling us that they are obliged to try to shoehorn their work into sometimes uncomfortable categories.

This is not the case in other countries. In Ireland, for example, circus has been recognised as an official artform since 2006, providing a level of legitimacy that has helped strengthen the sector's infrastructure and improve the transparency of its budgets.

Clarity on public funding figures for OACS in Scotland is challenging since OACS are not specifically defined or formally recorded within funding categories. It is therefore difficult to track investment and support for OACS.

“
Our art form needs to be celebrated visibly because then this conversation will be easier with funders and with communities, if they see that it's something that has value and worth.”

Artistic Director, Oceanallover,
Interdisciplinary Arts, Dumfries and
Galloway

There is sparse existing data and evidence about OACS work in Scotland. There are large gaps in data and evidence relating to OACS in Scotland and across the UK, including no census on the number of practitioners. The last reports produced by the sector in Scotland were published in 2012, focusing specifically on circus and physical performance and highlighting key issues facing practitioners. These included a lack of professional development opportunities, a lack of infrastructure for training and a lack of specialised technical and producing support, all of which remain barriers to the work of this sector in 2025 as evidenced in this study.

Recognition matters to the practitioners working in this field. Formally recording the collective body of this specialised work will enable its contributions to be recognised, supported more systematically and for its impacts to be maximised.

In the most recent funding round announced in January 2025 during this study, 12 artist-led OACS organisations were awarded Creative Scotland's Multi-Year Funding including 11 organisations joining the portfolio for the first time. These Multi-Year Funding awards were recorded under artform categories of either 'Theatre' and 'Multi-Disciplinary'. Total funding figures for 2025/26 were not available at the time of this report. This welcome momentum for supporting work in this sector could be strengthened and systematised through a deeper and up-to-date understanding of what the sector delivers for Scotland.

Research Approach

This study was undertaken during January to June 2025 by researchers from Queen Margaret University in partnership with Articulation. Through consultation with organisations and individual practitioners who participated in this research, the research explores the nature of OACS work produced in Scotland, its unique strengths and benefits, key barriers facing the sector and what is needed to overcome these, and how Articulation's peer agencies in the UK and Ireland are approaching similar issues.

Insights and data have been collected through:

- Sector focus groups comprising **18 sector practitioners, agencies, commissioners and funders** of OACS work in Scotland
- Interviews with **UK agencies**
- In-depth survey returns from **24 practitioners** in Scotland profiling their work and career experiences in this sector
- Additional **testimony** documented at Articulation's Summer Gathering of members in July 2025 to discuss the interim findings from this study

Focus group and survey participants have been quoted semi-anonymously throughout our reporting, as agreed prior to the research taking place. Where specific names and organisations are cited this is with the permission of – and in some cases at the direct request of – participants.

Our full report ***Beyond the Stage: Understanding the Benefits of OACS in Scotland*** presents and discusses full findings of this study. See this extended version for an indication of how the sector has been represented in this research.

“

Because these sectors are not understood as well as more conventional forms of art, they're easily dismissed.”

Arts Worker (Multi-Artform), Glasgow

Torchlit Procession Fire Show, Think Circus.
Photo: Gavin McCourt.




TRICK



A Picture of OACS in Scotland

OACS in Scotland is vibrant and diverse - in artform and audience - and is fuelled by a creative, multi-specialist, resourceful workforce.

Our survey captured a small snapshot of an extremely diverse range of work and practices with potential for reaching audiences beyond mainstream arts and cultural spaces and with a strong predominance of outdoor and free to access work.



Family-friendly · escapism · fun
joyful · interactive · visually driven
playful · interactive · participatory
collaborative · large scale · open air
positive · democratic · confidence
boosting · accessible · engaging
magical · adaptable · inventive
flexible · responsive · creative
relaxed · unexpected · rebellious
hope-giving · experimental
perspective-changing · fresh
amazing · innovative · weird
unconventional · animated
emotionally connecting
inclusive · interesting · intriguing
non-hierarchical · whimsical
extraordinary in the every day
unformulaic · innovative

Words extracted from the responses to our survey and used to describe OACS by practitioners.



What's clear from our engagement with practitioners in this study is that there is no one way of presenting and engaging with audiences. Given the richness of this sector there are certain to be practices that we didn't connect with through our consultation. **All of the respondents in our study present their work outdoors as the common denominator between their diverse practices.**

The uniqueness of OACS multi-artform practice highlights the susceptibility of this work to being misrepresented within a funding system structured around defined categories without specific classifications for OACS. This also means that the scale and scope of OACS every year in Scotland is not systematically recorded.

Practitioners are versatile, working across multiple artforms with remarkable skill.

Our study documents a rich and diverse range of showing a breadth, range and richness of practice, that indicates an incredibly versatile and skilled sector. The sector is heavily characterised by multi-artform practice, with survey respondents identifying an average of 3–4 artforms each. In addition to **Circus** and **Spectacle** the artforms listed by our modest sample include **Theatre, Dance, Music, Visual Arts** and **Storytelling**.

Practitioners contribute in multiple roles, blending creation, production, teaching, and community engagement.

Work is delivered in a range of ways including **creating and performing** original work; **directing and producing** shows; **supporting artform development** through mentoring and tutoring other and emerging practitioners; and **engaging the public** through events, performance, community work, co-creation, classes and workshops, games and dialogue. As a predominantly freelance sector which often lacks strong institutional recognition, practitioners rely on formal and informal professional networks for support, connections, opportunities and sense of cohesion as a collective.

OACS activity brings culture to an almost limitless range of locations.

Presenting work beyond conventional arts venues and festivals, this sector routinely demonstrates the rich opportunities for cultural engagement by taking work to unique settings including **the street, nature and natural spaces, mobile performances, schools and after school clubs, hospitals, care homes, nurseries, train stations, airports, shopping centres, cafés, parks, early years centres and playgrounds.**

OACS is highly accessible, with a mix of free, ticketed, and participatory experiences.

Free performance is the predominant model of engagement, with 92% of practitioners in our survey offering free shows outdoors and 54% indoors, in addition to a body of ticketed performances and activities. In addition to performances, **creative engagement** is a strong feature of the work undertaken by practitioners in this sector, through **creative learning** or teaching activities (75% of the artists surveyed), **socially engaged projects** (54%) and artworks **co-created** by the audience (50%).

OACS serves ‘all comers’ and reaches a broad range of diverse community groups.

The predominant audience for OACS in Scotland may be classified as ‘**all comers as part of the general public**’ which often sits at odds with grant-makers’ requirements for detailed definitions of intended audiences. A range of demographic groups are being actively engaged by the 24 practitioners in our survey alone, including **children and young people, people in areas of multiple deprivation, older people, disabled people, minority ethnic/global majority groups, LGBTQIA+ communities, babies and early years, adults with learning disabilities and people in mental health contexts.**

The OACS artists in our survey selected an average of 3.8 modes for how they engage with audiences in Scotland from a list comprising 7 options. This indicates a sector that is highly active and in cultural engagement. The seven options were outdoor free public performance; indoor free public performance; outdoor ticketed performance; indoor ticketed performance; audience participation or co-creation by the audience; creative learning or teaching activities; socially engaged projects with groups. An eighth category ‘something else’ received no responses.

65%

of respondents used spaces in nature as temporary performance spaces.

70%

of respondents presented work in the streets for the general public.

75%

described their main audience as 'all comers as part of the general public'.

92%

of respondents offered free shows in outdoor contexts.

“

We do work in a myriad of places, largely public space, but through commissions we will work where we are needed.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, Glasgow

“

When funders ask what audiences you are talking to, they have specific categories: 'working with all comers' doesn't fit!”

Company Director, Storyteller, Active throughout Scotland

“

The very word 'Outdoor Arts' has got an 's' on the end. Therefore, it's covering every range of artistic endeavour and funding organisations tend to focus on individual art forms, rather than understanding how artists wish to – and frequently do – work across a whole range of art forms

Festival Director and Artist in Public Space



Beat Roots. Merchant City Festival.
Photo Kris Kesiak for Glasgow Life

Artform Diversity

The artists in our survey referenced almost 50 artforms in their practice from 24 responses to the survey question: "Please tell us what specific activities your performance or art practice usually involves".

Theatre

Physical Theatre
Object Theatre
Theatrical Performance
Visually-driven Theatre
Mask Theatre
Puppetry
Mime

Live Art

Live Visuals
Devised Text
Interactive Games
Improvisation

Comedy

Visual Comedy
Clowning
Fooling
Stand-Up Comedy

Circus and Acrobatics

Aerial
Fire including Firespinning
Juggling
Balance
Bubbleology
Acrobatics & Partner
Acrobatics
Stilt walking
Chinese pole
Hula-Hoop

Movement

Dance
Parkour
Non-verbal Performance

Walkabout

Parades

Music

Live Music
Singing
Drumming

Word and Spoken Word

Storytelling (Contemporary and Traditional)
Speaking
Audience Interaction
Creative Writing

Visual Art

Textural Art
Costume
Costume Characters
Visual Displays

Digital Arts and Design

Visual Storytelling
Installations in Public Space
Photography
Film


Transfigured by Oceanallover.
Photo: Brain Hartley.





Strengths and Benefits of OACS in Scotland

The OACS sector in Scotland is distinguished by its innovation, accessibility, and connection to communities and place. By presenting work in public and unconventional spaces, the sector fosters immersive cultural experiences, broad audience engagement, and the transmission of specialist skills, contributing significantly to Scotland's cultural infrastructure and identity.



What OACS Offers

Innovation – “where the exciting stuff is happening”

Participants in our study have highlighted that the most experimental or unconventional work can't be made anywhere but outside of conventional artistic spaces and that the heightened need for adaptable practice in public spaces enables these artists to break new ground.

Immersive & Unexpected

Practitioners attribute the ability of these types of cultural offerings to impact people's day, alter their perspectives and reimagine familiar places to their accessibility at no cost, their occurrence in public spaces and the element of surprise or unexpectedness from the audience's perspective.

“

Not every artist working in these forms, but a lot of them, are genuinely pushing the art forms and mixing it up – sometimes in a cross-art form, multidisciplinary, whatever-label-you-want-to-stick-on-it way – in a way that I don't see in more conventional performance...This is where the exciting stuff is happening.”

Arts Worker, Multi-Artform, Glasgow

“

I make work with communities in public space in a process that means that when I (the artist) leave, the art continues and is owned by that community. Everyone can make art, and everyone owns public space, so everyone can make art in public space.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, North Ayrshire

Deepening Connections Between People and Places

The deep, two-way connection between artists and audiences—particularly in outdoor settings—was identified as a special characteristic of this sector, providing immersive and unexpected magical experiences in people's everyday lives. This depth of engagement is central to how OACS heightens cultural participation.

OACS artists in Scotland speak of place as being integral to their work. They are able to draw on the heritage and stories specific to the areas they work in, promoting rich, personal connections between people and places. The legacy of this type of work contributes to how people remember and feel about these places – the ones they are familiar with and others that an artwork or experience might draw them to – as a powerful form of cultural memory.

“

It's unexpected – passersby discover something they didn't expect to see. It can brighten someone's day and their mood. It allows us to connect to each other and our surroundings through a shared experience. It's for everyone.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, Edinburgh



“

Sometimes the magic of it is that you just turn a corner and it's there. And it sends another important message about the role of art in everyday life, rather than just for people who are seeking it out.”

Festival Director, Visual Theatre, Edinburgh

Re-animating Places

The work of OACS practitioners with communities often involves a deep commitment over a long period of time, catalysing combined effects of placemaking and audience engagement. OACS are consequently recognised for their potential to ‘animate’ or ‘re-illustrate’ places and broaden the appeal of local and national events, creating a lasting sense of occasion and excitement.

Culturally Democratic

OACS are arguably the most democratic form of cultural engagement, being accessible, free and performed mostly in public space. Across our consultation we heard that the outdoor and public nature of their work is what makes these artforms so inclusive. This is recognised to be a fundamentally important and valuable aspect of these artforms.

An Entry Point into the Arts

All of this creates an accessible entry point into the arts for those who may not engage more formally with arts and the culture sector. With much of the work being free, un-ticketed and taking place in accessible public spaces, many of the barriers to participation in mainstream arts and culture are removed. This highlights the vital role of OACS in the broader arts and culture ecosystem and is corroborated by recent findings in England¹.

A Mobile and Responsive Cultural Infrastructure

A key benefit of OACS activities is that they can be taken to areas where there isn't existing cultural infrastructure. The ability of OACS practitioners to take work wherever it is needed, transforming non-arts spaces into a unique cultural experience shared by an audience on their own terms, makes them invaluable cultural assets for Scotland.

Fuelled by tenacious, creative and passionate practitioners

Above all, a problem-solving ‘can do’ DIY approach can be identified as a key characteristic of the sector, partly as a result of the sense that they have to create their own career pathways. Artists and practitioners constantly adapt their work to suit different audiences and spaces and find ways to hone their skills, make breathtaking work and present it with minimal resources, institutional support or formal structures to guide them.

“

The stories we tell about a place, and the way they become part of the physical infrastructure of Heritage, are shaped by those whose stories hold power and authority. OACS offer a route for us to tell more democratic stories about our places, reconsidering whose voice is heard here, who gets to be part of the story going forward, how we might revisit and reconsider the stories of our past”

Kathryn Welch, Co-Director, Culture Counts.
Speaking as a panellist at Articulation Summer Gathering 2025.

“

In terms of taxpayers, value for money and the good use of money, you cannot get more democratic artforms than circus and street arts. You look around the audience and it is a very different socioeconomic structure than what you will see in the National Opera House.”

Lucy Medlycott, Director, ISACS

“

To be an artist in this field, you have to have a vocation. You have to feel driven to do it because it's quite difficult. It's artistically rewarding but in terms of making it happen, it's not easy at all”

Alex Rigg, Artistic Director,
Oceanallover, Interdisciplinary Arts, Dumfries and Galloway

“

Performing in the street is amazing. You have no idea who will be there, which makes space for serendipity. You create a meeting point. You're both transformed, it's very beautiful and you had no idea that was going to happen”

Luke Winter, Storyteller.
Speaking as a panellist at Articulation Summer Gathering 2025.

“

We think of “cultural infrastructure” as venues, formal space. But we might also consider outdoor artists themselves as a key part of that infrastructure; they go out and they create cultural assets that can go into any place or context.”

Kathryn Welch, Co-Director, Culture Counts speaking as panellist at
Articulation Summer Gathering 2025



OACS practitioners hold a unique combination of specialist skills extending beyond artforms to technical expertise, audience engagement, and logistical know-how. The sector safeguards heritage practices, contributing to Scotland's intangible cultural heritage and maintaining skills and techniques passed down through generations.



Unique Skills within OACS

Specialised ‘how to’ knowledge for presenting work in unconventional spaces

In addition to being skilled in specialist OACS artforms, outdoor artists possess a practical skillset that is of wider value for Scotland’s culture sector. 101 Outdoors Arts’ (2021) study in England, affirms that “the demands of making work in public space are very different and the relationship with space and audience needs careful negotiation when the formalities and frameworks of the conventional venue constructs are not at play.” It also emphasises the time needed to build up the required “body of knowledge and experience” for working in specific contexts³.

Audience Engagement and Co-creation

OACS artists excel in interacting, engaging and co-creating with people. Their ability to draw and retain audiences in public settings relies on understanding how locations shape behaviour and how people move through and use space. As one multi-artform practitioner noted, “the placing of a spectacle is critical” (Multi-Artform Practitioner, Argyll and Bute).

Technical Expertise for Outdoor and Unconventional Spaces

The sector is a repository of skills for working in outdoor or unconventional spaces including understanding how equipment like sound and lighting works in the open air and how to respond to changes in weather conditions. For circus and aerial arts, rigging and health and safety knowledge is specific to the artforms and requires specialist technicians.

Logistics, Audience Safety and Legal Compliance

Practitioners are experienced in the logistical processes and legal procedures needed to work safely with public audiences, ensuring events meet relevant standards and protections.

Adaptability and Responsive Problem-Solving

Flexibility, the ability to see alternative options and pivot when things don’t go to plan is considered to be a skill at which OACS artists are especially adept. This source of expertise came to the fore during the Covid-19 Pandemic which forced many mainstream cultural and social activities online or out of doors into safer open-air spaces, with many organisations turning to the OACS sector for advice and support.

“

It is not as easy as putting an indoor show on the streets. Outdoor performance is a different and highly skilled craft that people develop over many years.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, North Ayrshire

OACS artforms are an important part of Scotland's Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) encompasses practices, performances, creative skills and cultural knowledge that are part of a continued heritage of practice passed down generations. This includes oral traditions, performing arts, festive events and social practices. By UNESCO's definition ICH is "traditional, contemporary and living at the same time", inclusive, representative and community-based⁴.

Heritage Significance of OACS Artforms


Practitioners in this sector are the caretakers of specialist artform skills which represent an important niche in the cultural sector in Scotland, as well as a form of intangible cultural heritage that is already recognised in many European and world nations.

OACS as Living Heritage

OACS exemplify all of these elements through a wide range of specialised artforms and heritage skills and their role as an expression of localised place and community. For UNESCO, safeguarding of such ICH focuses mainly on "transmission of knowledge and techniques"⁴.

Circus as Recognised Intangible Cultural Heritage

Circus is already listed by many countries across the world as a form of their Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), including the following European states: Belgium, Sweden, Finland, Hungary, The Netherlands and Germany⁵. The UK's professional circus body has been working with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) "to achieve recognition for the intangible cultural heritage significance of Circus and its importance in the cultural life of Britain" by including Circus on the UK's Inventory for ICH⁶.

A photograph of a circus tent entrance. The tent is green with yellow and white patterns. A wooden door is open, revealing a chalkboard sign with the word 'FREE' and some illegible text. The tent is set up on a paved area.

Despite these important strengths and benefits, our study shows that many realities experienced by practitioners undermine the scale and impacts of their work.



Story Wagon by Luke Winter with Performer Shona Cowie.
Photo: Harrison Reid.

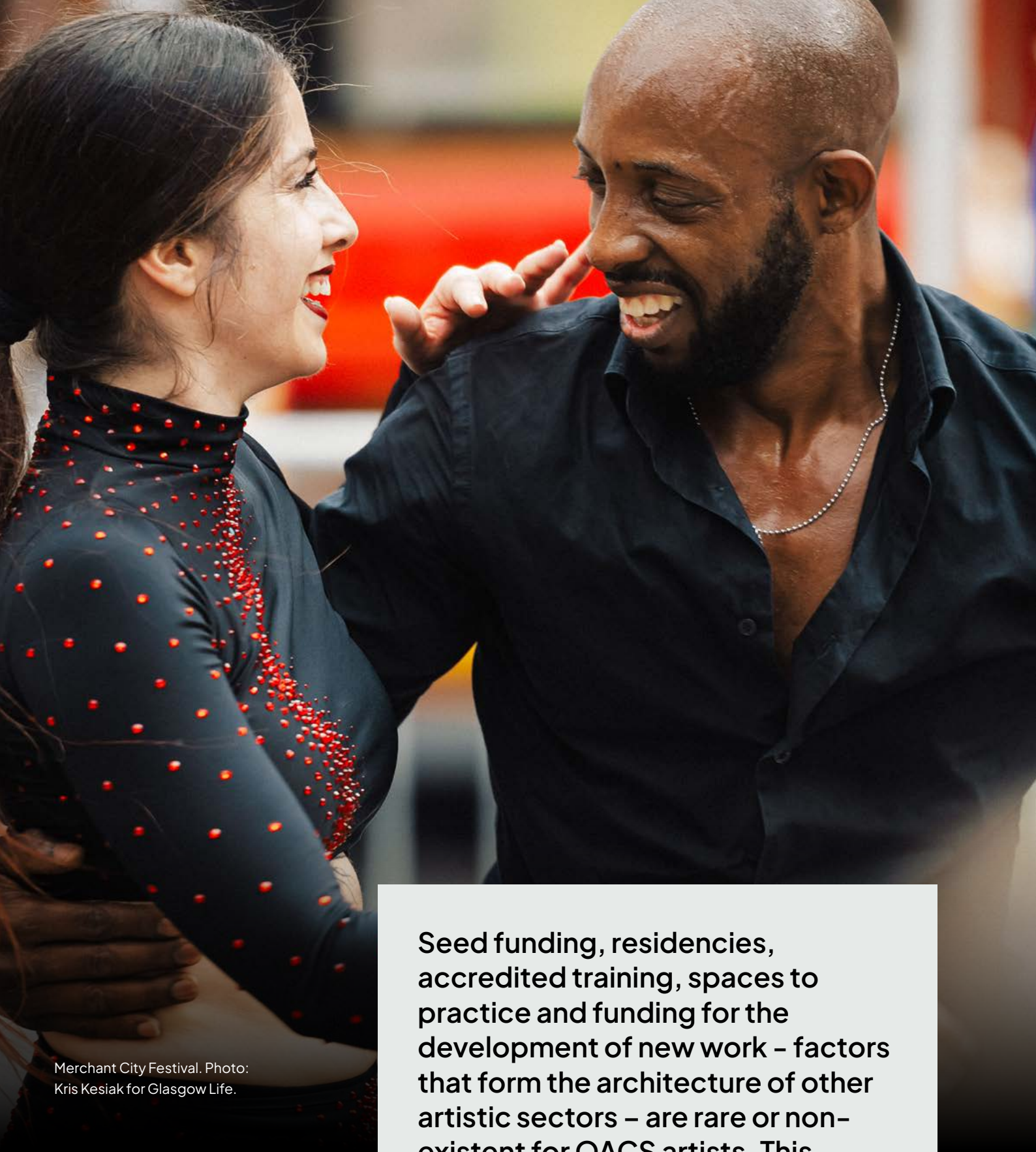
Windows - All or Nothing. Photo: Brian Hartley.



Structural Challenges Facing the OACS Sector

Although the sector is rich in talent and innovation, artists work within a challenging environment shaped by structural gaps in training, space, funding and presentation opportunities. They face significant barriers to sustaining careers, developing their practice and realising the full potential of their work.





Merchant City Festival. Photo:
Kris Kesiak for Glasgow Life.

Seed funding, residencies, accredited training, spaces to practice and funding for the development of new work – factors that form the architecture of other artistic sectors – are rare or non-existent for OACS artists. This leaves the onus on artists to find ways to forge their own careers with little support, structure or formal pathways.



Lack of Established Career Paths

The artists in our study attest that building a professional practice takes decades; mastering and maintaining these skills is a continual process. For almost half of the respondents in our survey, their practice has been built from training in childhood, particularly in relation to circus arts, dance and music. The majority told us that their professional practice is based on a mix of formal and informal training, largely through one off workshops, talks, masterclasses and techniques picked up from peers.

But practitioners in Scotland have to seek specialist and high-level training in England or overseas – for circus in particular, training in Scotland is still described as “at a grassroots” level (see below). **There are currently no accredited, specialist courses in OACS in Scotland**, despite this having been highlighted in the last sector reporting in 2012⁷.

Limited Access to Training Spaces

Artists living in urban areas appear to have more access to specialist training spaces than those in rural areas, but the cost and availability of these spaces makes them hard for many practitioners to access. Sector responses on this issue in our survey imply inequity in provision across Scotland in terms of geographical location as well as artform focus. A lack of suitable places and spaces to train was also recorded in Articulation’s 2012 report on Circus in Scotland, suggesting that this problem remains endemic. Our research further highlights a lack of funded residencies for OACS practitioners.

“

I do not have an accessible regular training space which allows me to train at full capacity. To improve my practice, I go elsewhere to take workshops as circus in Scotland is still at a grassroots level.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, Edinburgh

Limited Opportunities to Present Work in Scotland

The majority of our survey respondents from the sector (15 respondents: 62%) felt that there are not enough opportunities in Scotland currently for them to practice and present their Outdoor Arts, Circus or Spectacle artforms. Only 1 of the 24 artists agreed that there are enough opportunities for their work, and 8 (33%) were undecided. This issue was also raised by participants in our focus groups, who identified a shortage of venues and festivals in Scotland with meaningful commissioning power, coupled with a general lack of funding and support for developing OACS work.

Funding Challenges of Free to Access Work

Being free to access was seen by all respondents as key to the value of OACS work but this means that productions are heavily reliant on external funding. Even where work is ticketed the income rarely covers the full costs, resulting in practitioners providing unpaid 'labour of love'.

Barriers to Career Viability

OACS artists rely on short term contracts and piecemeal work and juggle the instability with the constant pressures to maintain their skills, pursue artistic work and funding, and generate other sources of income as needed. For many of the OACS practitioners in this study, continuing their professional practice has necessitated significant sacrifices in their personal lives. Career precarity represents a clear risk of talent drain from the sector, threatening by extension all of the unique skills it carries and the invaluable benefits OACS contributes to cultural life in Scotland.

“

There's more training spaces and the artform's taken more seriously in France, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands. They have full time training schools of a really high level, that are university level... there's nothing like that here”

Jennifer Paterson, Artistic Director, All or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre

“

It's not only the artistic skills that take time to develop but also the producing, logistical, financial and administrative skills that you need in order to be able to sustain your artistic practice.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, The Highlands

“

The sector really is on the cusp and if it isn't supported now, it's going to lose out, because the artists need to make a living and they will go to other sectors”

Lucy Medlycott

Director, Irish Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle Network (ISACS)

“

A lot of the work is free, and it's great that it's free, but the fact it's free means that it has to sit outside the transactional way that art is regarded by those who run venues where there's admission prices ... where there's a whole system of how artists are or aren't supported...”

Festival Director and Artist


“

If you're making outdoor work, generally speaking, you can't really charge people... And depending if your work involves more than just yourself, and you want to work professionally with professional performers, then you're going to have to pay them: you should pay them. So where does the money come from? That's a bit of an issue.”

Artistic Director, Oceanallover, Interdisciplinary Arts, Dumfries and Galloway


Dreams of the Small Gods - Zinnia Oberski.
Photo: Timjan Wall.





Systemic Barriers Impeding OACS in Scotland

Outdoor Arts, Circus and Spectacle in Scotland face multiple structural and perceptual barriers that limit the sector's recognition, funding, development, and international reach. Practitioners report challenges spanning policymaker awareness, funding systems, and practical constraints around creating, presenting, and evaluating work.



Challenges in Recognition and Perception

Limited understanding and recognition of OACS artforms as legitimate practices with distinct requirements for support is impacting the ambition and scale of work that can be produced and presented in Scotland as well as opportunities to work.

Policy Visibility & Value

Our study highlights systemic issues around perception and recognition of OACS as a collective body of work and skillsets with potential to contribute to Scottish society, culture and policy objectives.

Being undervalued was identified as an issue that affects how artists and projects are supported and funded. Europe and Ireland were referenced as being more supportive of their sectors, with accredited full-time courses, more festivals and opportunities to present work, dedicated training spaces and, in the case of France, a history of valuing and supporting their OACS sectors to the same level they do dance or opera. OACS practitioners report the particular vulnerability of their work to tokenism.

The lack of value for OACS among policymakers is compounded by the apparent invisibility of the sector. An observation from the sector was that there is no record of anyone from Creative Scotland senior management or from Scottish Government attending the Surge Festival - Scotland's largest Outdoor Arts festival with 15 editions behind it - in an official capacity which, according to the respondent, "I imagine is not true of any other sector." (Multi-arts practitioner, Glasgow)

Risk Aversion to Non-Conventional Work

In addition practitioners report a strong sense that many venues, local authorities and others who programme arts and cultural work don't understand what OACS can be, and as a result, mistakenly view OACS projects as a risk in terms of attracting an audience.

Reliance on Individual Champions

As a consequence of such misperceptions, lack of recognition and risk aversion, OACS in Scotland tends to depend on individual champions whose understanding of the artforms stems from personal awareness and practitioners' individual ability to access decisionmakers. This situation arises from a lack of centralised policy attention to OACS, resulting in piecemeal support and inconsistent sector development across the country, and creates a risk for the sector's standing should a particular champion change job.

Our study finds that local authorities are an important potential pillar of support for OACS work in the UK, but there is a need for higher awareness and systematic support for OACS beyond those who are already advocates for this work. In Ireland Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle have strong support from local authorities. This is underpinned by national strategies like the Street Performance and Spectacle Policy 2024 which reports that "Street Performance and Spectacle has some of the highest audience attendance figures year on year... This work is often presented within communities in collaboration with local authorities and as part of regional festival programmes ⁸.

“

There's this real sense of tokenism from both funders and programmers. They're like "Oh, but we had a circus show this quarter, so we shan't fund another". You would never say that about a play "Oh no, we had a play on Tuesday. We can't possibly have another play for a year!" ...That has been a continual experience of my career at all levels, from seed funding through to massive commissioning. If you're going into the general pool of commissioning and programming then you end up kind of ghettoized into more and more niches”

Circus Artist and Maker, Glasgow

“

[There is] a lot of fear of 'will there be an audience for it?' and proving that there is.”

Jennifer Paterson, Artistic Director, All or Nothing Aerial Dance Theatre

Structural and Funding Constraints

To compound these perception barriers, throughout our consultations a central issue raised was that OACS work doesn't readily fit existing public funding structures, creating challenges for applicants.

Misaligned Funding Streams & Support

As already stated, OACS aren't presently recognised by Creative Scotland as distinct artforms. This requires OACS artists to apply for and compete for funding under categories that don't fully match their work, narrowing their chances of success, while potentially constraining the scope and ambition of their work. In addition to this, as a collective of artforms that sit outside or between mainstream categories, some of the OACS practitioners in our study feel they are being let down by general funding initiatives that are intended to support the cultural sector at large.

As an example, Creative Scotland's Touring Fund was mentioned as a programme designed to mitigate the financial risk and incentivise programmers to support new and innovative work in theatres and other ticketed forums. OACS artists and producers in our focus groups perceived that the fund was actually working against them, either being used as a measure of audience demand or facing eligibility challenges because their work isn't building based. To compound this, they find that touring funding is often a prerequisite to securing programming commissions.

While OACS practitioners do access funding and income from a variety of sources they can be hampered by difficulty aligning with funding structures. An example cited by practitioners is Creative Scotland's Open Fund designed for independent artists and freelancers. Its cap at £50,000 for projects limits the scale of, for instance, Spectacle that can be produced and delivered in public for free. This disconnect persists also in relation to training and development. In our interviews and focus groups the point was raised that, because the OACS artforms are often presented at festivals or as one-off events (our next point below), the training and development work that takes place on either side of a performance is not acknowledged or supported.



Stirling 900 - All or Nothing.
Photo: Julie Howden

Limited Support for Creation Time

Respondents in this study reported that outdoor artists tend to be booked for one-off festival events, almost as a service without consideration of creation time. Work embedded in communities, co-created work or art created entirely by participants involves significant advance planning and preparation to enable quality engagement with communities and participants, time that is not always part of the funding package. Added to this are OACS-specific complexities to be prepared for when working outdoors or in public or unconventional spaces.

Challenges in Measuring Impact

OACS practitioners also encounter difficulties aligning with the standard mechanisms for quantifying and qualifying impacts that are a requirement for external funding. Since public audiences aren't registered, there is no way of capturing audience statistics or contacting them to ask about the impact the artwork had on them. Demonstrating the impact of public OACS work in the language of funders, with the evidence they require can therefore be challenging.

“

There still is a long way to go in educating [commissioning bodies]. They actually have to allow the artists support and resources as they would a dancer or a theatre maker, or anybody else. It's not just “can I book you on a Monday for a show on a Thursday?” There needs to be creation time. It's not just ‘a booking’ of ‘a service’, it's actually art.”

Lucy Medlycott, Director, Irish Street Arts, Circus and Spectacle Network (ISACS)

“

Organisations and festivals [may be] interested in booking and championing the finished product of a good show, but almost none are prepared to step up and offer any meaningful support in the development and creation of said work.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, Glasgow





WraptheWorld: Suspending Disbelief - Neil Butler.
Photo: Simon Meek.

Under-Supported Homegrown Excellence

While the value of OACS in relation to major cultural events may be easily appreciated, the consistent support and infrastructure necessary for Scottish artists to maintain their practice and develop that work in Scotland isn't available, resulting in large scale work being imported from elsewhere.

The unique skills of the sector captured by this research show the OACS sector as specialised, innovative and highly skilled, producing artworks and cultural experiences of excellence. However the limited training, development, funding and performance opportunities outlined above show the extent to which excellence in Scottish OACS is under supported. The development and transmission of skills in the sector are largely reliant on practitioners themselves, and much of the work in this sector is delivered without systemic support.

The inconsistency of provision was highlighted in our focus groups in relation to rural areas, where artists can't anticipate audience numbers/donations as in a city location, and where ambitious OACS projects need commissioning support, causing practitioners to question: "How do rural and smaller communities bring these exceptional works into smaller context, where there's less budget?" There is very great potential to amplify what this sector can achieve with systemic support and recognition.

Limited International Opportunities

OACS practitioners in this research likewise highlight connecting with the global network and audiences as an ambition that the current system of support doesn't serve.

The Scottish Government's *International Culture Strategy 2024–2030* acknowledges the support required by cultural organisations to deliver international policy objectives for Scotland, stating that "international work requires cultural organisations to have access to skills, knowledge, expertise and networks [as well as] capacity and resource to plan and deliver activity."². It further recognises that "a lack of capacity and capability can prohibit some organisations and practitioners from realising their ambitions to develop and deliver their international work even when doing so could benefit their practice and financial sustainability"².

Our study shows that there is scope for doing more to promote Scotland's OACS expertise globally, so that Scottish practitioners can join and showcase their work at key international OACS events in places like Spain (at the Fira Tárrega and La Mercè festivals), Portugal (Imaginarium festival), Singapore (Aliwal Urban Arts Festival) and Australia (Adelaide Fringe). This would directly support the aims of the government's International Culture Strategy as well as the National Events Strategy, both of which are outlined in the next section below.

“

[Scottish Government and Creative Scotland] are very happy to go and see work coming in from Australia or France at the Edinburgh Festivals. There's a want to try and create work of that scale and size and quality in Scotland, but there's not the infrastructure to support it at the moment.”

Jennifer Paterson,
Artistic Director, All or Nothing Aerial
Dance Theatre

“

Outdoor Arts is largely undervalued by policymakers and funders in Scotland. Only when there is a large public-facing event (like the Commonwealth Games or the Tall Ships) are Outdoor Arts taken seriously and given support - but in between these events the support is pitiful, compared to say indoor, scripted plays. This results in much work being imported for the large events and the development of the sector and a whole in a very stop/start way.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, Glasgow

“

Peer Festival Directors working outside of the UK have expressly told me that because the UK doesn't really offer any mobility support, or funding to enable artists to show their work internationally, then... we lose out, right? Far more investment in internationalism, in culture, and enabling outward and inward mobility, would serve these sectors particularly, because I think these artists rely on that international network for skills and training, for exchange, for all these different things.”

Festival Director
Visual Theatre, Edinburgh


“

I'd just love to see that for Scottish artists working in the Outdoor [arts], Circus and Spectacle sector in Scotland - being able to have that regular opportunity to go en masse somewhere, have visibility within an international arts market and be able to talk about their work. I think that's something that's really missing on a consistent basis.”

Producer, Multi-Artform, Glasgow

Brass Aye - Merchant City Festival.
Photo: Kris Kesiak for Glasgow Life.





Unlocking the Value of Outdoor Arts, Circus and Spectacle

Strengthening OACS in Scotland will boost the sector's contribution to place-making, community building, widening cultural engagement, producing world-class events, and enhancing Scotland's international cultural reputation. Addressing the systemic barriers highlighted in this study will allow the sector to achieve greater scale, ambition, and impact. If these barriers persist, Scotland risks losing the full social, cultural, and policy benefits that OACS can deliver.



The work of OACS in Scotland is highly relevant to all of Scotland's cultural and societal policy objectives, through its deep engagement with audiences and place and its role as highly mobile community-based cultural assets.



Policy Opportunities for Scotland

Culture and Communities

The principles underpinning the Scottish Government's policies for culture include the human right for everyone to *participate freely in the cultural life of the community [and] to enjoy the arts*¹⁰.

The *Culture Strategy for Scotland* published in 2020 and refreshed in 2023 outlines the Scottish Government's cultural vision and values for Scotland. The updated document *A Culture Strategy for Scotland: Action Plan* (2023) details how the government plans to deliver the ambitions of its Culture Strategy.

Pledges and actions of *The Culture Strategy for Scotland* are to:

“Realise the transformational power of culture” in achieving a broad range of policy outcomes, where **“cultural organisations and creative practitioners engage with a wide range of people, harnessing the power of culture through their cultural assets, programming and content.”**

And to **“Empower communities through culture”** including “amplify[ing] the important role that community-based cultural assets [which might include OACS artists] can play in strengthening and empowering communities”¹¹.

The Scottish Government commits to **support resilience in the cultural sector** including measures to “maximise impact of existing public sector support” and to advocate in national and local government to “ensure the value of culture is understood and maximised”¹¹. These naturally dovetail with national outcomes under Scotland's National Performance Framework for vibrant and diverse cultures that are expressed and enjoyed widely¹² as well as communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe. The language around community

corresponds directly with what OACS can do in community settings, specifically a **focus on local perceptions, places to interact and social capital** defined as “the resource of social networks, community cohesion, social participation, trust and empowerment.”¹³

Cultural Democracy and Inclusion

The Scottish Government's *Programme for Government for 2025–26* states an urgent ambition to counter threats to democracy and find solutions to societal issues. It identifies **fostering relationships and engaging with communities as a key to combating polarising forces and engaging people who feel left out of society**¹⁴.

As already demonstrated in this report, OACS's key strengths lie in creating positive relationships and engaging with people.

Scotland as a World-Leader in Events

Scotland's National Events Strategy 2024–2035 is geared towards retaining Scotland's global status as a world-leading events destination with a vision for Scotland's reputation as “the perfect stage” for events to be recognised nationally and internationally. Its objective is the successful development and delivery of large-scale sporting events that draw global audiences and much-loved annual cultural festivals, highlighting a need to ensure that events meaningfully engage communities at all stages to maximise local ownership and buy in¹⁸. **When it comes to participative engagement and community-based large-scale Spectacle events, OACS holds valuable experience and expertise and is a natural source of good practice beyond its own sector.**



“

I think circus' real strength is that its main storytelling tool is the human body [so] there's no accent because there's no voice. It's often easier to cross borders of class or educational level... I find that audiences are more accepting of difficult subject matter, or ... more intangible subject matter with circus, because it's more visual.”

Artist and Maker, Circus, Glasgow

Scotland's International Cultural Profile

Another national outcome for Scotland is that, “We are open, connected and make a positive contribution internationally”¹⁵.

Scotland's International Culture Strategy for 2024–2030, as the first strategy of its kind by the Scottish Government for the purpose of enhancing international cultural engagement, sets out a vision for Scotland's “culture and creative sector to be globally connected with the means and opportunities to achieve its international ambitions and potential, and contribute to Scotland's cultural, social, economic and environmental wellbeing through its international work”¹⁶.

As highlighted earlier in this report, OACS represents a largely unrealised asset in terms of promoting Scotland's culture and cultural policy values globally, yet one with great potential.

A British Council Scotland study in 2022 entitled *As Others See Us: What Makes Scotland's Cultural Sector Distinctive?*, capturing global perceptions of what makes Scotland's arts and culture sector distinctive on the international stage, showed that Scotland's culture sector is seen as world-leading in its diversity of artforms, representation and audiences, inclusivity and accessibility – across all of which OACS demonstrates sector-leading expertise. In addition, the report highlights global recognition of an innovative cultural sector in Scotland that pushes boundaries, this again being a core characteristic of OACS¹⁷.

Scotland's Landscape as the Ultimate Cultural Stage

The recognition that Scotland's unique landscape and natural habitats are “critical to the success of our tourism and events sectors and central to our identity and ambitions for a well-being economy” further highlights the value of OACS as part of these strategies¹⁹.

Scotland's National Events Strategy recognises that “Scotland's nature is unique, with awe-inspiring landscapes and habitats found in few other places on Earth”.

Our interview with Articulture in Wales revealed how Outdoor Arts are valued in Wales as a way to connect people with the land. Articulture is active in supporting the Welsh OACS sector to bring art into the natural environment in Wales. It does this through partnerships with the Welsh government's environmental management organisation National Resources Wales, the National Landscapes and National Parks agencies, as well as nature charities like RSPB, with the explicit aim of creating opportunities for outdoor arts in the landscape and connecting audiences with nature.

“

Events can showcase what Scotland offers in all its beauty and diversity... [O]ur diverse coasts, islands, landscapes, and city greenspaces are a key asset in hosting and attracting responsible major events to Scotland”

National Events Strategy 2024–2035, Page 11



“

Circus is often dismissed as something light-hearted and thoughtless, but in fact social circus has invaluable mental health and social benefits.”

Multi-Artform Practitioner, Edinburgh

Placemaking, Civic Pride and Community Cohesion

The findings of this study of OACS in Scotland are of direct relevance to Scotland's policy focus on fostering a sense of place, broader aims around placemaking and the Government's dedicated Place Principle. The Place Principle promotes a shared understanding of place along with collaborative and tailored approaches to managing services and local assets, with the aim of achieving better outcomes for people and communities ²⁰.

Research for VisitScotland (2021) finds that even modestly-scaled events and festivals are very significant for people's sense of and relationship with place. They create an opportunity for communities to come together providing space for interaction for different groups within the community. Festivals and events improve perceptions of place and when they are co-created with communities they foster a collective process of placemaking ²¹.

The testimony we gathered from OACS practitioners mirrors VisitScotland's findings that **local pride and appreciation of an area are closely linked to feelings of attachment and a sense of belonging [which] are seen by policymakers as key indicators of community cohesion** ²¹.

Supporting Population Health and Wellbeing in Scotland

In addition, participative OACS artforms that require physical activity including Circus (for instance acrobatics, aerial circus) and Dance, contribute to the nation's health as well as mental health and wellbeing through active engagement and cultural expression. Such activities contribute to Scotland's objectives for health and wellbeing, another of the core national outcomes in the National Performance Framework. Scotland's Population Health Framework 2025–2035 sets prevention as one of its two key priorities. It links prevention, or "health creation", to positive connections to place and community and pledges to work with all sectors to maximise their contribution to this ²².

Cultural events can play an important role in **helping people to cope with stress**, and they have potential to directly address issues related to **social isolation and loneliness** according to VisitScotland's research ²¹.

Maximising the Social and Policy Contributions of OACS

This report concludes that the social and policy contributions of this sector could be supported and maximised through the following policy measures, targeted resources and programme opportunities to enhance conditions and opportunities for OACS work and strengthen the sector.

Policy Measures

- Recognition of OACS as individual artforms within Scotland's culture sector.
- A dedicated category for the OACS artforms in Creative Scotland funding structures, to enable tailored support and tracking of funding data.
- A national strategy for OACS in Scotland focused on their widescale policy benefits, encouraging local authorities to support and commission OACS work.

Targeted Provision of Professional Resources

- Access to more specialised training in Scotland for OACS artists.
- Facilities in Scotland for practitioners to develop and innovate practice, with associated residency opportunities.

Opportunities to Present Work

- Adapted access for OACS to national touring programmes and infrastructure.
- Representation of Scotland's OACS practitioners at international showcase platforms.
- Pathways for Scotland's practitioners to contribute to major local, national and international events.

Useful models for supporting these measures highlighted above and in our full report include:

- **Policy recognition and budgets for OACS** like in Ireland where Circus has been a recognised artform since 2006 and there is a dedicated Street Arts policy (2024) with a specific Circus policy due in 2025. (See Chapter 1 of our full report for further details of this policy environment for OACS in Ireland)
- **Policy support for local authorities** to commission OACS like in Ireland as referenced on page 37 above.
- **A Touring Network for OACS** like in England where the Outdoor Arts agency Without Walls is a major commissioner and facilitator of toured work. See the full version of this report for more details.
- **Partnerships** to bring Outdoor Arts into the national landscape like in Wales as profiled on page 49 above.

Recommendations for next research

Finally, we suggest that the following research would be of value to build on the findings of this report, deepen the policy evidence and generate further insights about what OACS can contribute in Scottish and UK contexts:

- Case studies of Scottish local authorities illustrating how they commission OACS locally and the value of this work for local outcomes
- Analysis of collated impact data from Scottish OACS projects
- A study investigating the logistics and cultural value for Scotland of mounting large-scale spectacle projects, identifying international exemplars
- How comparable countries in Europe, Scandinavia and elsewhere sustain vibrant OACS sectors, investigating associated policy and social values.

Next Steps and Future Direction

Articulation exists to harness the power of the collective to provide a more connected, supportive and assertive environment for this creative community to thrive.

We will collaborate with sector stakeholders, policy makers, our members and other practitioners to develop OACS in Scotland and continue to celebrate our successes and identify development opportunities. An essential element of this is artform recognition, OACS urgently needs to be properly acknowledged and legitimised, leading to structural support in order to take its rightful place alongside other artforms.



5 first actions for developing OACS as a sector in Scotland

1. Acknowledgement of OACS as recognised artforms

Unlike other artforms including theatre and dance, OACS are not recognised as distinct artforms by our main arts funding body Creative Scotland. This lack of artform acknowledgement in Scotland has affected how these artforms are understood, it means that their profound impacts are not fully appreciated and has resulted in a lack of support for these art forms. This has created longstanding barriers within the sector which impede practitioners' development and practice.

What We Will Do

As part of its organisational review Articulation wants Creative Scotland to recognise OACS as distinct artforms that are uniquely inclusive.

2. OACS registered as part of Scotland's Intangible Cultural Heritage

The EU Parliament has recognised Circus as an essential part of European culture since 2005. In countries where Circus and Outdoor Arts have been recognised as part of their ICH, the process to acknowledgement as an art-form has been strengthened and accelerated²³.

What We Will Do

It is Articulation's intention to work with our partners to have OACS recognised as part of Scotland's ICH.

3. Sustainable, long term OACS funding pathways

Without suitable artform recognition and corresponding legitimisation, OACS in Scotland faces significant funding challenges. Articulation members and practitioners of OACS are currently limited in the work they can develop because of that work needing to fit criteria specific to 'theatre', 'dance' or 'multidisciplinary' work.

What We Will Do

Articulation is calling upon Creative Scotland to ensure funding criteria recognises and includes OACS, and that it reflects the breadth of current creative practice, encompassing multidisciplinary work that often sits across different sets of funding criteria. It is only when Scotland's OACS artists have this legitimacy, funding and support, that this pioneering and important work can grow, develop and take its place alongside established artforms on the international stage.

4. Development of an OACS Strategy for Scotland

A key part of artform recognition is the development of an OACS Strategy. This will outline a vision for a Scotland where OACS is respected and celebrated and where everyone has access to high-quality OACS performance and participation experiences. This will help us to set out strategic actions to support artistic excellence, fair pay, safe working conditions, sector development and enhanced public engagement.

What We Will Do

Articulation will lead the work to develop a strategy that calls for recognition and investment in these vibrant forms as core to Scotland's cultural policy, championing wellbeing, creativity and shared experience in every community.

5. Building-based Infrastructure to support new work and quality circus education

Only when there are suitable spaces for OACS to develop will Scotland be able to retain practitioners. OACS practitioners experience unacceptable variation in safety standards between venues across Scotland.

Additionally practitioners often encounter issues around the size and capacity of venues or sites required to stage Circus – which generally need to be larger than non-circus productions. The requirements for suitable rigging, technical support and other infrastructure tend only to be met by larger-scale venues, yet Circus artists whose practice is still developing may not be able to attract audiences on a scale to book such venues. Their minimum staging requirements, however, may lie beyond the capacity of smaller venues, potentially creating a performance barrier and disparity of access.

What We Will Do

We are calling on the Theatre sector across Scotland to collaborate with us on a code of practice which ensures consistent safe practice across all venues and events staging circus performances.

We also call on local authorities, the Scottish Government and Creative Scotland to ensure that all new indoor venues are designed with the technical requirements of circus artists in mind.

**We can make Scotland
a place where OACS
can flourish, bringing
all its benefits more
systematically into our
cultural life.**

“

We're hovering on the endangered species list at times.”

Alex Rigg, Artistic Director, Oceanallover,
Interdisciplinary Arts, Dumfries and Galloway

“

A cultural ecosystem doesn't happen overnight, it needs sustained investment and support”

Kathryn Welch, Co-Director, Culture Counts and
Articulation Summer Gathering panellist

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