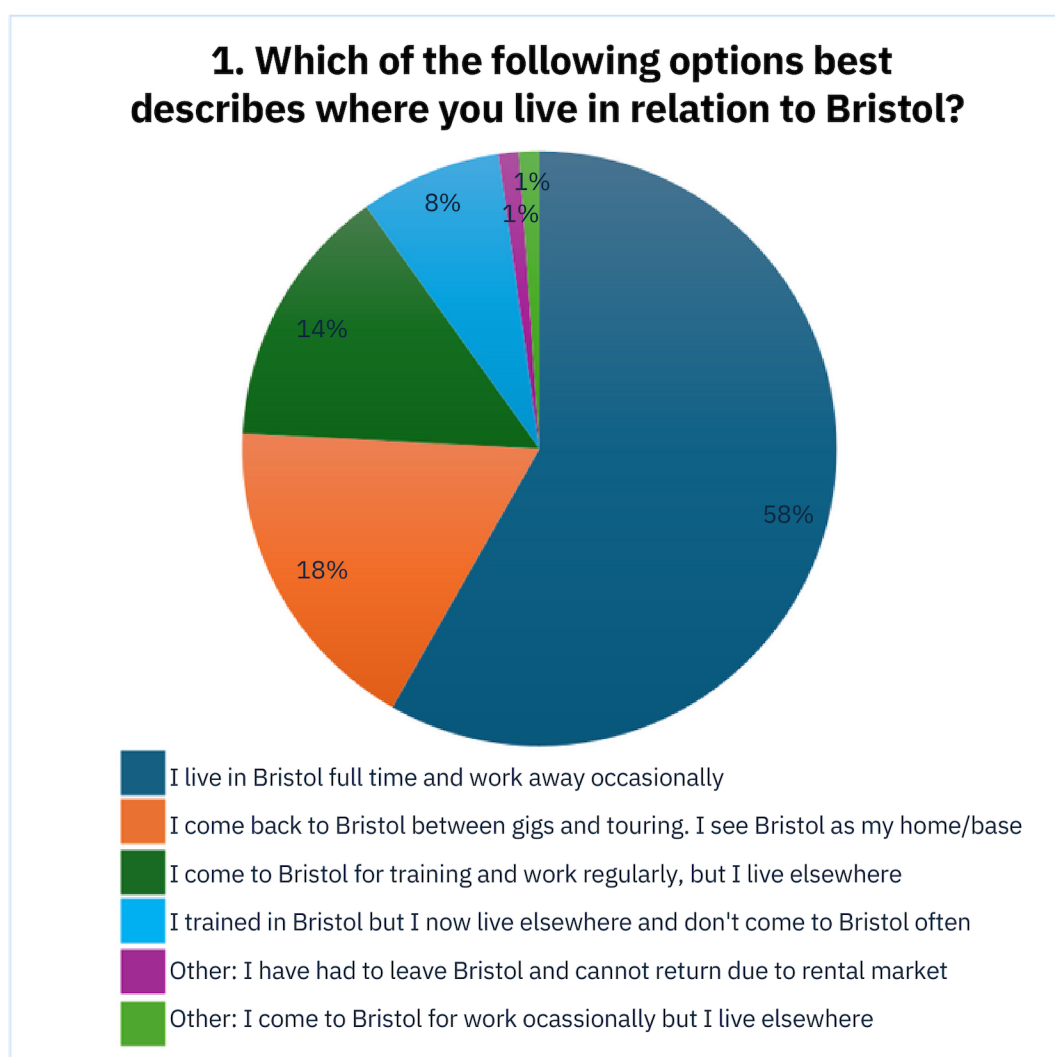

BRISTOL CIRCUS CENSUS 2024

Bristol is a circus city! Through the Bristol Circus Census 2024, we wanted to build a picture of the number of circus artists, creatives, students and workers living in or with strong connections to Bristol and understand more about the resources and support they need to sustain their careers in this city.

We hope to use this knowledge to shape our work and advocate for Bristol's circus sector locally, nationally and internationally, and are sharing our findings so that other artists and organisations can do the same.

The survey was open for 1 month between 3rd May and 3rd June 2024 and was shared on instagram as a collaborative post between Circomedia, Unit 15 and The Island. We recieved 91 responses.



Our opening question gives an impression of respondents' connections to Bristol. 76% of respondents live in Bristol (58% working away occasionally and 18% seeing Bristol as home between gigs and touring), and 14%, attracted by resources offered by the city, come regularly for training and work but live elsewhere. This shows that 90% of

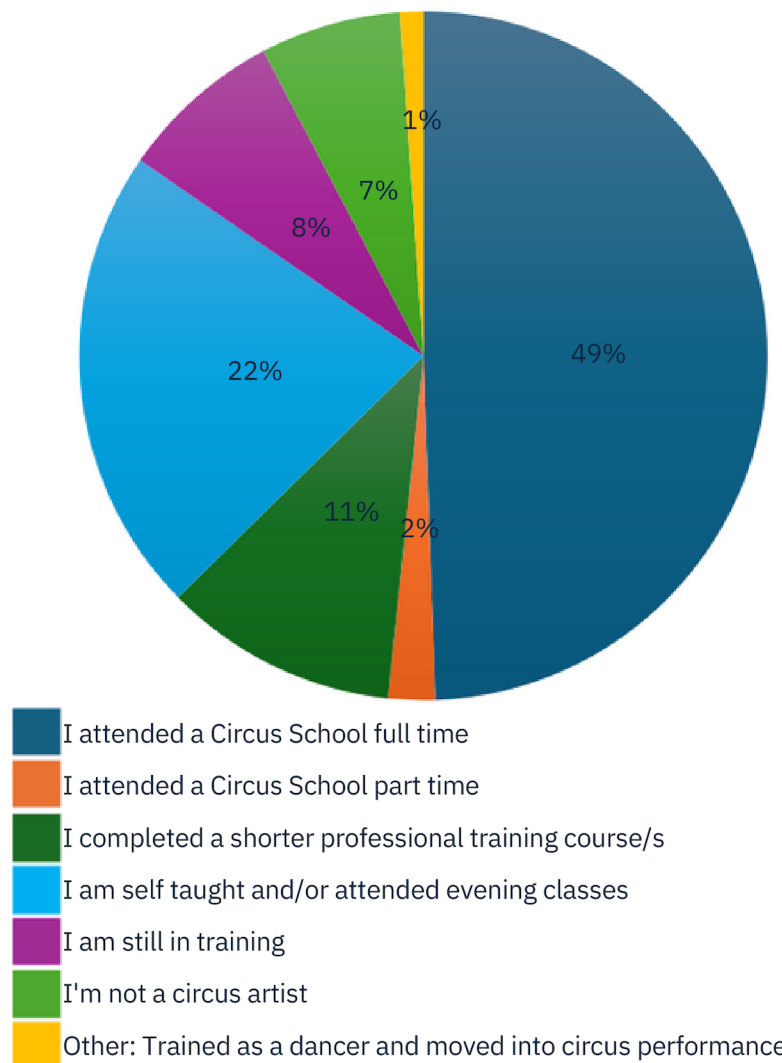
respondents have strong and current ties to Bristol. Of the remaining 10% who don't live or regularly work in Bristol, 8% previously trained in Bristol, 1% come only occasionally for work, and 1% previously lived in Bristol but cannot return due to housing challenges.

2. Which of the following best describes how you work within the Circus Sector?

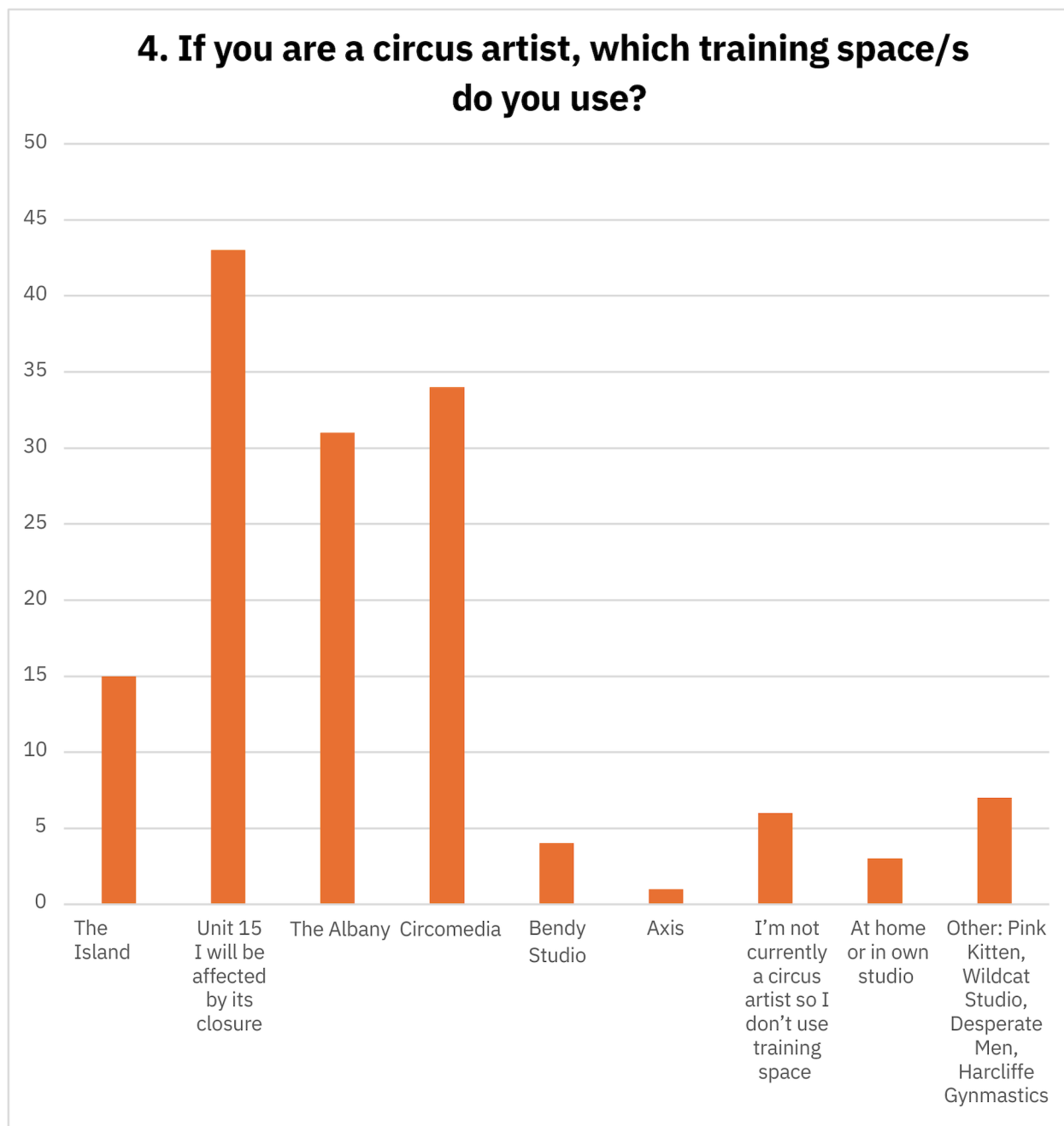


Question 2 shows a complex picture of respondents' work within the circus sector. 40% selected two or more answers, revealing the tendency of people within the sector to diversify across performing, teaching, producing, tech, design.

3. If you are a circus artist, which of the following options best describes your training?

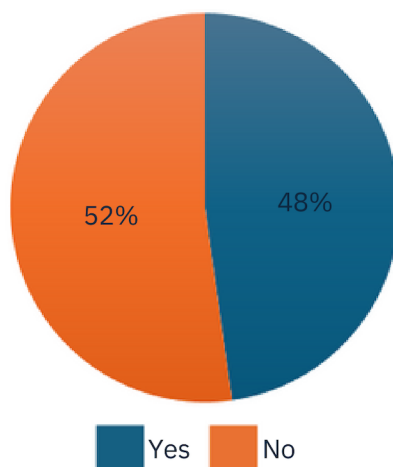


Question 3 shows that 51% of respondents trained at Circus School (49% full time and 2% part time). It is reasonable from this to deduce the impact of having a circus school in Bristol – Circomedia – on the city’s circus sector. Artists are drawn here for full-time training and remain in the city to benefit from the city’s resources, in part offered by the school. Those who train elsewhere are then attracted by the circus community and infrastructure. Having professional circus artists in the city means others can benefit from evening and private classes, a route taken by 22% of respondents. However, a thriving circus city does not translate into opportunities to perform in the city, as we shall see in Question 8.



From the results of question 4, we can see that the most used space by respondents is Unit 15, run by the Invisible Circus, which is soon to close. This presents a gap in much-needed large-scale training spaces for artists in the city. Interestingly, the training spaces most used correlate to the size of the spaces. Circomedia is next largest after Unit 15, then The Albany, then The Island, followed the smaller or more niche spaces: Axis, Pink Kitten, Wildcat Studio, Desperate Men and Harcliffe Gymnastics. We can consider this answer together with the results from Question 10 in which people identify their primary concern around access to spaces in Bristol as the availability of large-scale training spaces.

5. Is Circus work your only occupation?



As well as working across different areas of the circus sector, as identified in Question 2, 52% of respondents also work outside the circus sector. We can infer from this that respondents supplement their income through other means in order to sustain careers in the circus sector. It is useful to look at Question 5 together with Question 6, which shows respondents' annual earnings from their work within the circus sector. Together respondents contribute £970,000 to the economy annually. (This has been calculated by taking the midpoint from each range, eg. for earnings of between £5,000 and £10,000, we have used £7,500 in our workings, and for the highest range, we have taken a figure of £32,500.) Respondents' mean earnings from circus work is £12,763 (excluding those who are not earning or working voluntarily). While those working in the circus sector make a valuable contribution to the economy, we can see why income from circus might need to be supplemented through other work, as evidenced by Question 5, to allow basic living costs to be met.

6. In the last financial year how much did you make from your work in circus?



7. What could help you sustain a Circus career here in Bristol? What are the main challenges you are facing?

Respondents were keen to share with us the challenges they are facing and we saw clear themes emerge across their answers. We have identified five key areas of concern: Income and Cost of Living, Access to Funding, Opportunities, Networking and Career Development, Training and Creation Space.

Income and Cost of Living

Many respondents told us about the challenge of meeting living costs. A common understanding was that performance fees have not risen in line with inflation, with people being paid the same today as they were a decade ago. Access to affordable housing was continually cited as a challenge. Work expenses were also identified as challenging: the cost of training and equipment, and workshop and storage costs. One respondent mentioned that lack of financial security around circus work, with the pressure of this increasing with age and wanting more security for the future.

“The cost of living versus the money from gigs. Performance fees haven’t gone up much since I started over ten years ago”

“I’ve been priced out of Bristol so am moving to Newport to continue my career.”

Access to Funding

A frustration was evident in respondents’ view of public funding. Many felt competition for Arts Council England funding in Bristol was high with success rates low. There was also an evident desire for local venues to offer space in kind for creation. Some respondents expressed frustration that Bristol benefits from its reputation as a city of circus but the local authority, it was felt, could do more to support the sector in terms of funding and partnerships.

“In Bristol, competition for funding is extremely high, and as it is not a priority place, success rate is low.”

Opportunities

Respondents showed a clear wish for more performance opportunities in Bristol. This included opportunities for scratch performances and paid performances. Creation opportunities were also cited as a challenge, which overlaps with the evident shortage of space for creation and training. Some respondents wanted better paid local opportunities, which would reduce the need to travel so much for work.

“I would greatly benefit from being able to hire quiet rehearsal space with rigging to develop my show, or stints of residencies.”

“The lack of regular work as a performer in Bristol means, frustratingly, having to travel to other cities or countries for contracts. The only type of contracts (not one-off cabaret gigs) available in Bristol are R&D creations, and these are rarely more than 1 or 2 weeks of work. With Unit 15 closing, even this is likely to disappear.”

Networking and Career Development Some mentioned the difficulty of finding work, identifying early career and industry entry as being particularly challenging. Some respondents wanted a better way to find out about job opportunities and many wanted a way to connect with other artists and potential collaborators. More workshops were suggested as a way to meet other professionals, and a central online space with a directory of artists and jobs listings was presented as another idea. One respondent brought up the need for more support with admin and completing funding applications.

“Where are jobs advertised? Most jobs are given to people who know people.”

“A more social, central hub for circus would be amazing. Unit 15 was beginning to become this, but no more. It is a bit of a problem when you can know hundreds of circus performers in Bristol, but very rarely organically see them without planning. It means training can often lack a social and networking element... I’d love to regularly bump into more of the Bristol circus community, but everyone trains all over the place, and you often don’t see a big selection.”

Training and Creation Space

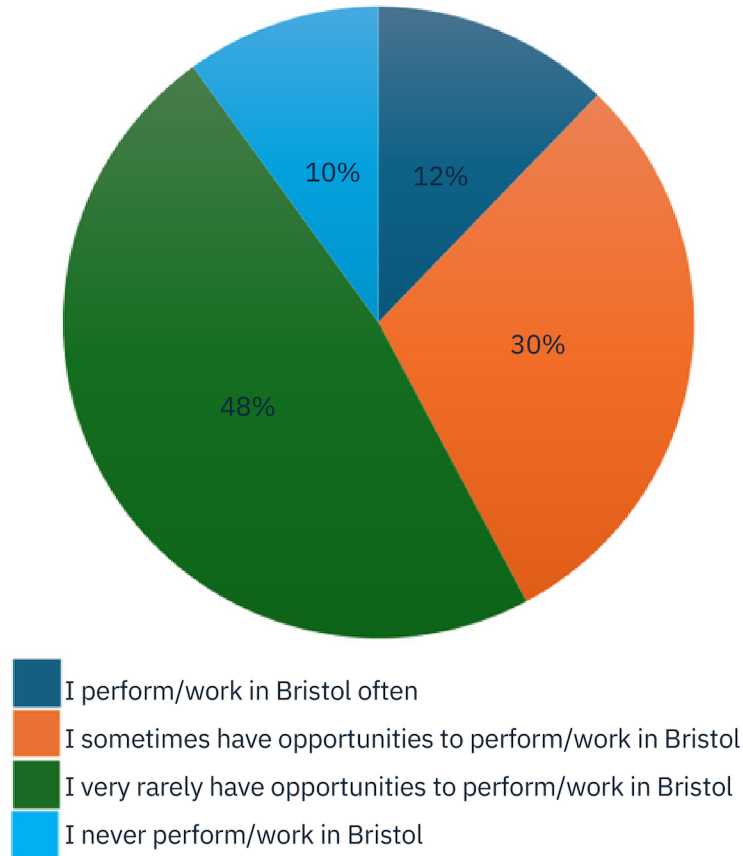
Training and creation spaces appeared as a central concern in the survey. Respondents repeatedly voiced their desire for access to affordable and well-equipped spaces to train and to make work. The imminent closure of Unit 15 was identified by many as a real threat to the sector in Bristol. A clear need emerged for a space to take its place, well-equipped with rigging, and with heating and good lighting.

Artists who specialise in dynamic aerial (swinging trapeze, cloud swing, wall running) felt Unit 15’s closure might prevent them from being able to train in the city. Other challenges identified in terms of space were a lack of training for beginners, and limited spaces suitable for ground-based performers. One respondent felt training spaces in Bristol were geared towards aerial. Respondents experience a high demand for creation space in general, an issue compounded by Unit 15’s closure.

“Availability of suitable spaces for residencies – particularly for big sets for outdoor shows. Currently don’t know of any of these apart from Unit 15, which was in high demand and is now closing.”

“The main challenge is the impending closure of Unit 15. We need a multi-purpose training, performance and development space in Bristol.”

8. Which of the following options best describes how often you have the opportunity to perform or work on circus performances in Bristol?



Perhaps striking, given the strength of the circus community in Bristol, are the limited opportunities for performing in the city, with only 12% of respondents having the opportunity to perform often. This has to be understood in the context of circus and theatre in that artists often expect to tour and work away from home. This lack of opportunity does not currently seem to deter artists from living in the city. We might deduce that the most important factors drawing the circus sector to Bristol are access to training and creation spaces and a thriving community offering support and collaboration. This is backed up by Question 10, see below.

9. Is there anything you feel could improve opportunities to perform or work on circus performances in Bristol?

Question 9 invited a wealth of ideas from respondents. Below is a summary of some of the main ideas that were offered:

Income and Cost of Living

- Payment for training
- Subsidised training spaces
- More support for performers on low income and those with children

Access to Funding

- More funding opportunities
- Grants and support from local authorities

Training and Creation Space

- Dedicated circus creation and residency space with NPO status, operated like 101
- A training and creation space that will remain open long-term, and which a community can build around
- More creation and training spaces with aerial rigging
- Local authority support in allocating space for circus training and creation

Access to spaces where artists can work collaboratively

- A dedicated vertical wall for harness training and shows Residency opportunities with testing ground performance attached
- Keep Unit 15 open
- A purpose-build training and creation space

Opportunities

- More scratch nights
- More residency opportunities
- Opportunities to share large-format shows as works in progress
- Cross pollination of art forms, including theatre and dance, with multidisciplinary scratch nights, marketed to a wider audience than Bristol's circus community
- More regular circus events
- Encouragement of local businesses to employ circus performers

Network and Career Development

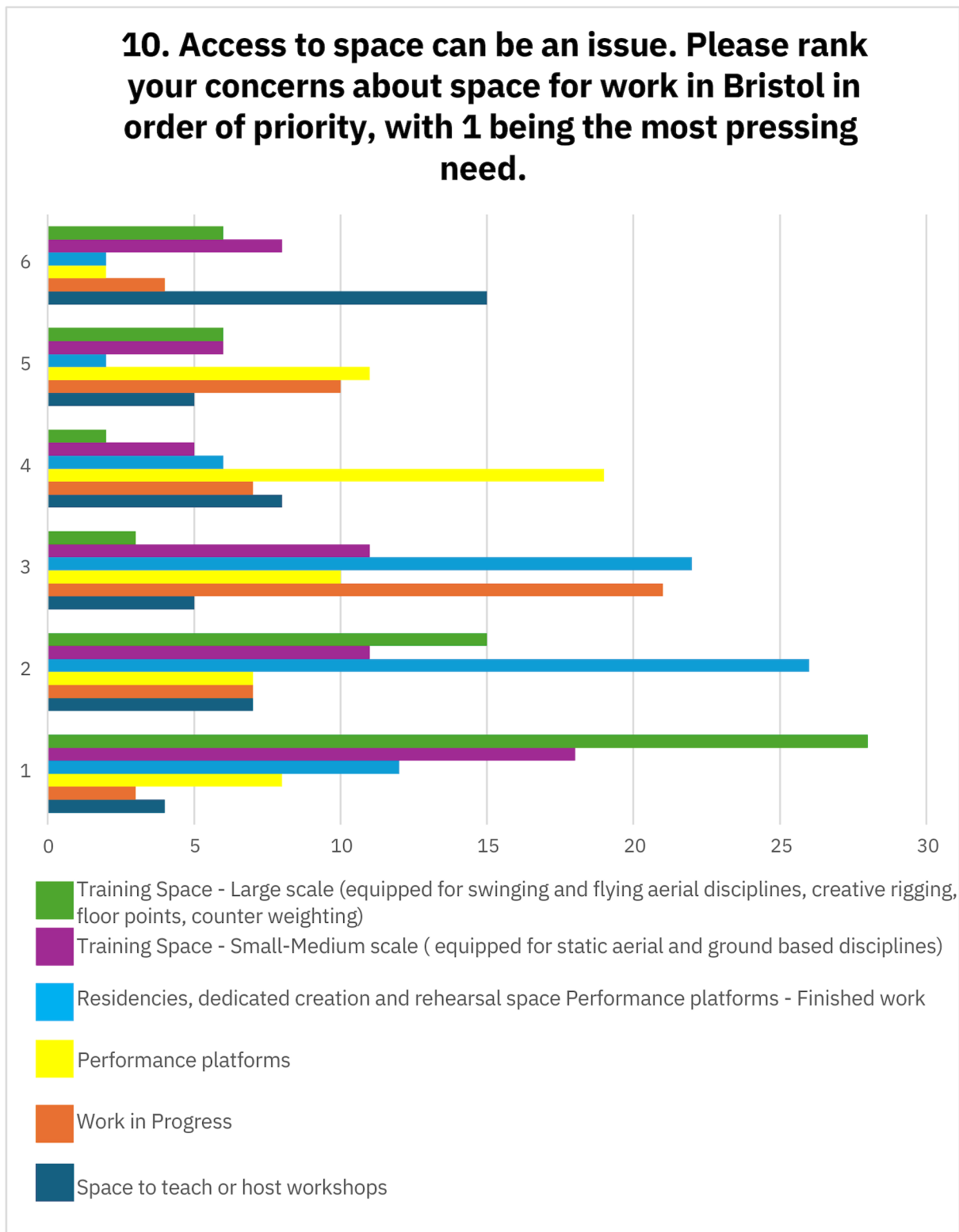
- Better publicised jobs in the sector
- Opportunities for artists to meet with producers and venues and to pitch their work
- An online database of people who work in the circus sector A centralised online space for listing job opportunities
- Regular gatherings and workshops for professionals
- A monthly support group sharing ideas, opportunities and community living
- Affordable professional training courses

Venues

- Outreach programmes to develop audience base
 - Programming from local venues
 - More venues equipped to host circus
 - Better links with theatres
- Increased rigging facilities and relationship building with small arts venues

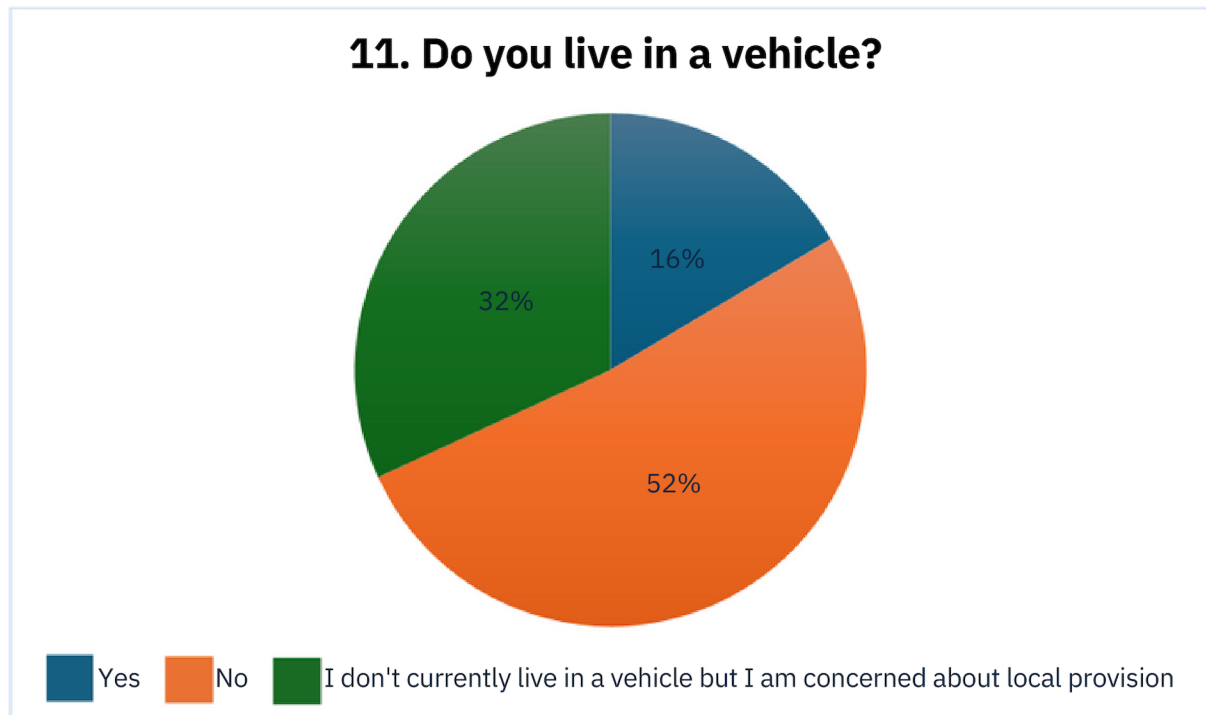
Other

- Sexual abuse within the sector was mentioned by one respondent. Although only mentioned once, it's important not to omit this from the report.



As we saw in Questions 4, 7 and 9, large-scale training spaces are of huge importance to the circus sector in Bristol. Question 10 corroborates this finding, identifying access to large-scale training spaces as the priority concern. Access to small and medium scale training spaces, and residencies, dedicated creation and rehearsal space are the other top concerns. Least pressing concerns are opportunities for performance. This backs up what we inferred from Question 8. Although performance platforms and

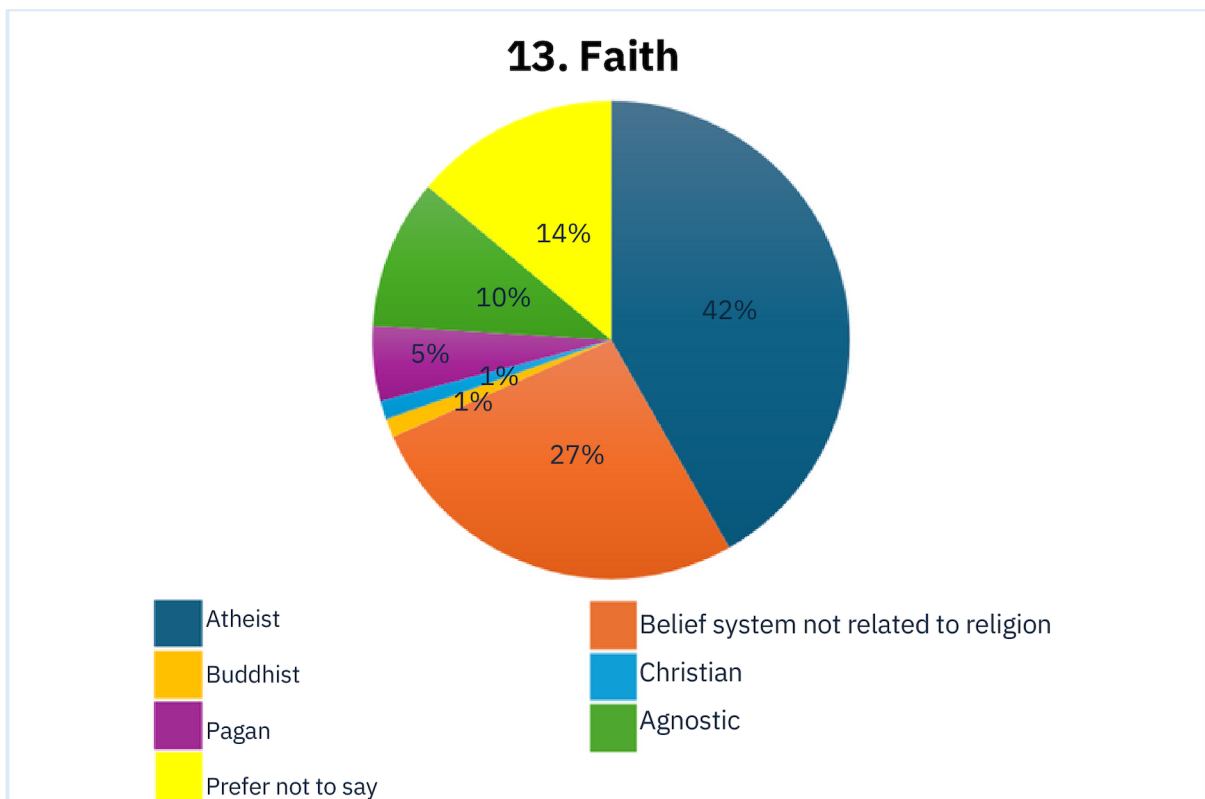
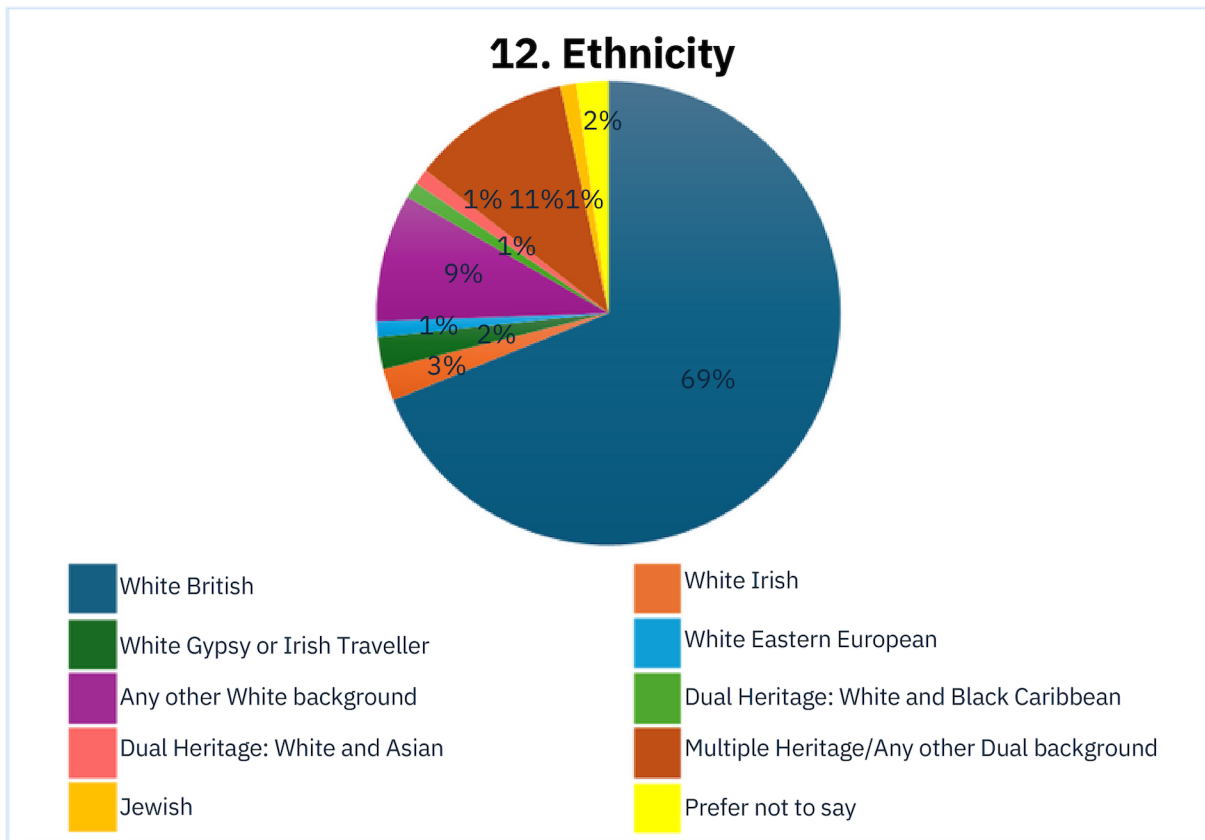
opportunities within the city are important, they don't seem to be what draws the circus sector to Bristol. The infrastructure for training and creation is vital to the sector and it is important to the community that this is maintained.



We asked this question as we would like to understand how far site or winter quarter provision for 'vehicle dwellers' in Bristol affects the circus community specifically. 48% of respondents either live in a vehicle or are concerned about local provision. This is close of half of all respondents and is, therefore, an important issue to address for the security of people working within the sector, and for the survival of the circus sector in Bristol.

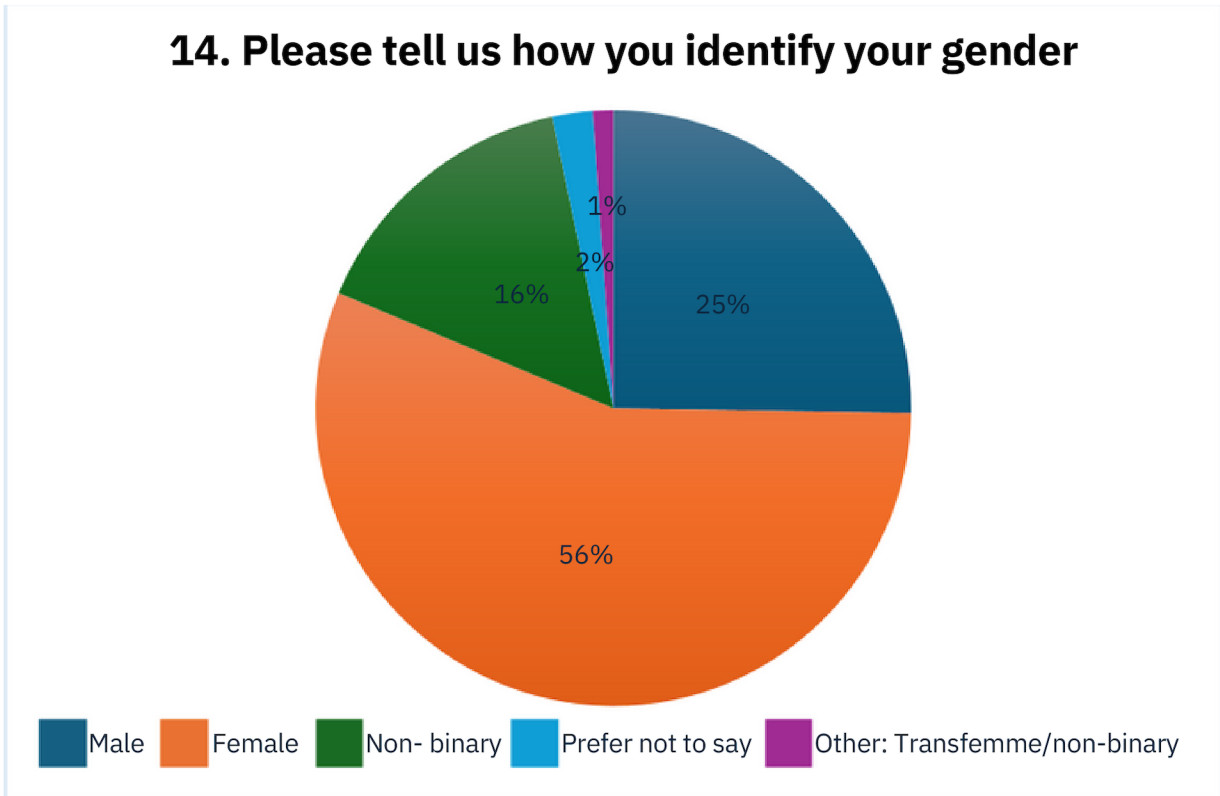
Equality and Diversity

Ethnicity and Faith



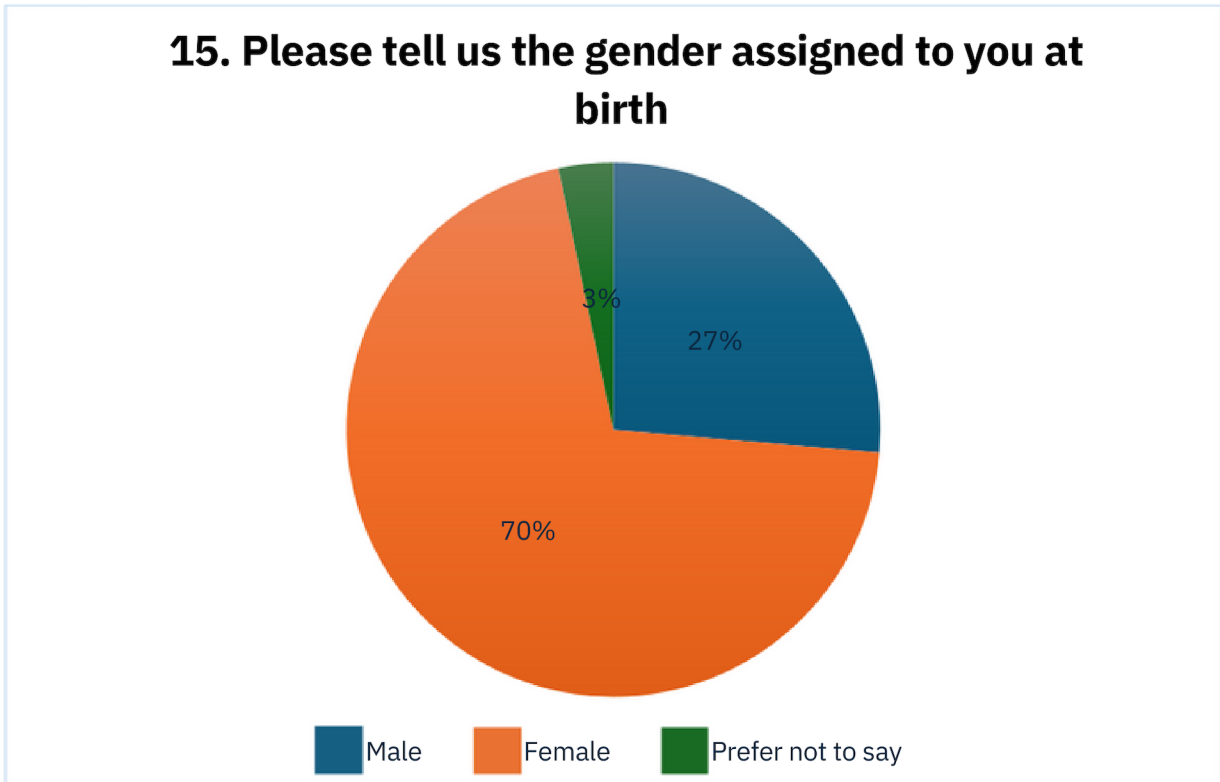
Gender, Sexuality and Age

14. Please tell us how you identify your gender

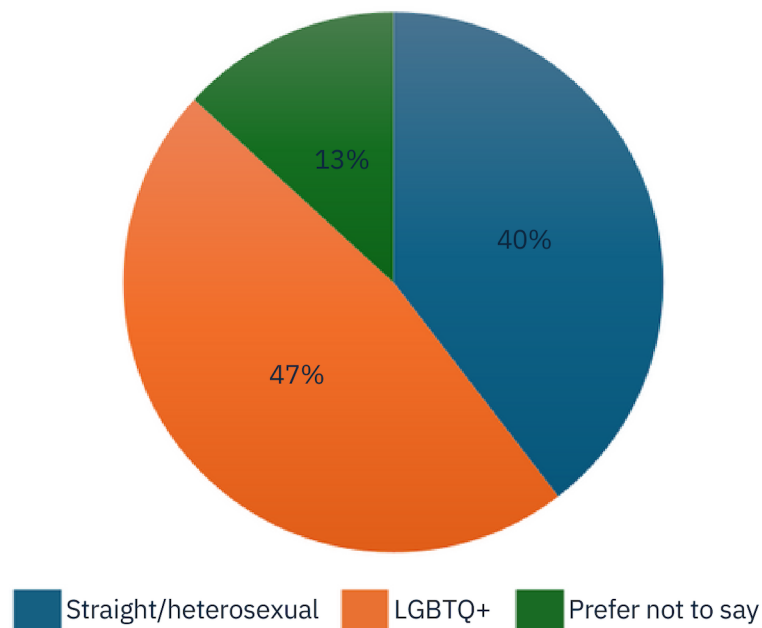


Questions 14 and 15. Though 70% of respondents were assigned female gender at birth, only 56% of respondents identify as female. 16% of respondents identify as non-binary.

15. Please tell us the gender assigned to you at birth

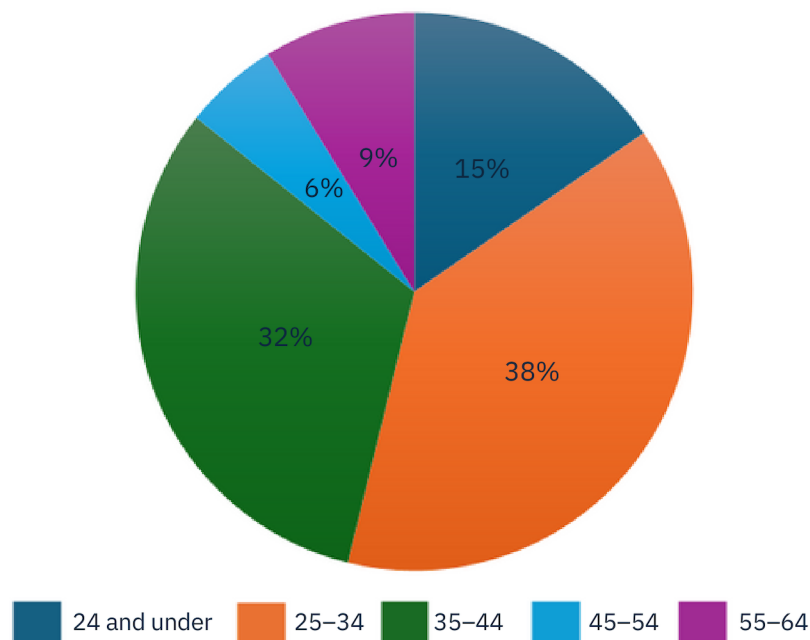


16. Please tell us your sexual orientation



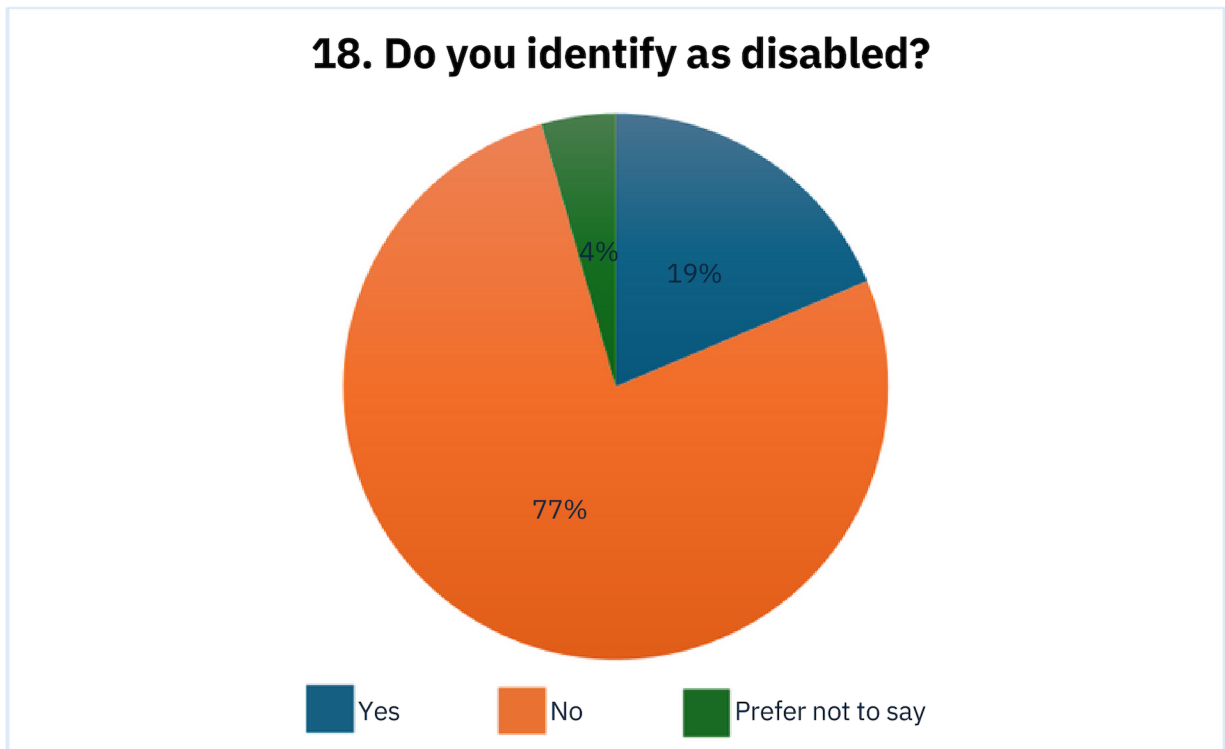
From Question 14, 15 and 16, we can see that there is large LGBTQ+ representation within the circus sector in Bristol.

17. Please tell us your age

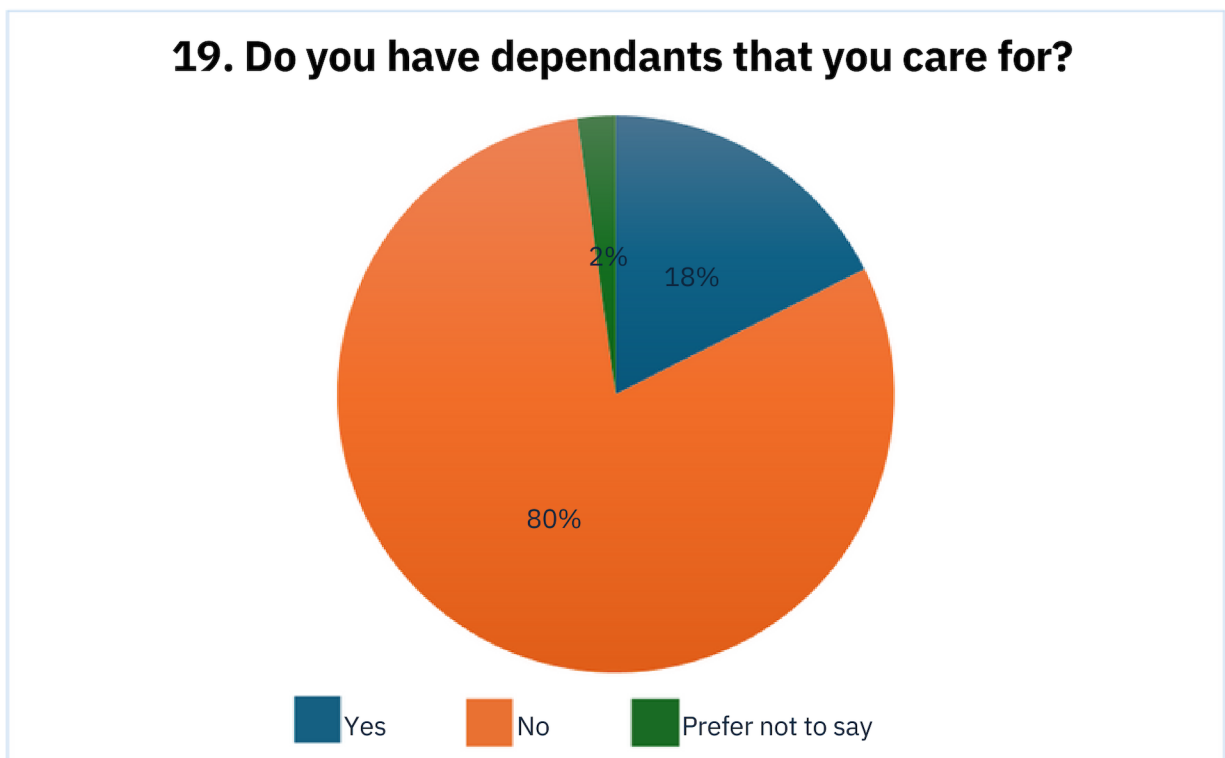


Please note, the question was asked with the following categories: Under 16, 16–24, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50–54, 55–59, 60–64, Over 65. The data has been reorganised to show a clearer picture. None of the respondents selected Over 65.

Disability and Caring Responsibilities



19% of respondents identified as disabled. This is slightly lower than the UK population in which it is estimated that 23% of working age adults (age 15 to 64) have a disability. 4% of respondents preferred not to say.



18% of respondents care for dependents.

With thanks to The Invisible Circus, The Island, Circomedia and The Albany for sharing the survey.

Please feel free to reference data from this report, citing the Handstand Arts Bristol Circus Census 2024.

