THE COMICS CULTURAL IMPACT COLLECTIVE

Community Interest Company

COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER ROUNDTABLE REPORT

MARCH 2024

Identifying challenges and opportunities in the UK comics community

who are we?

[The Comics Cultural Impact Collective](#) (CCIC) was founded in April 2023 with the aim of raising awareness of the cultural potential of comics in the UK. By working to improve comics infrastructure, funding and industry, we want to cultivate better opportunities and recognition for our artform.

CCIC is a Community Interest Company (15346023), led by an independent group of professionals within the UK comics community. Between us we have extensive experience in change-making and activism in arts, heritage and science.

In 2023, we launched with research into the diverse audiences and untapped sales potential of the comics form in publishing[1]; and with data to show the inequity between public funding given to comics compared to other artforms[2].

Now we want to gain a greater understanding of what our huge, vibrant and diverse community considers to be the main priorities for improving the comics landscape in the UK. Insights gathered from every part of the comics industry will help us set our direction.

You can find our website at
[thecomicsculturalimpactcollective.org](#)

[1] [The Power of Comics](#), The Bookseller, 15/9/23
[2] [Research by CCIC](#) 2023

Executive Summary

- Comics are a powerful tool, taking on almost infinite utility, in any industry, organisation or sphere where communication is valued. This potential— and the associated return on investment — needs to be signalled to both makers and potential markets in order to create a landscape where comic artists can thrive.

- Good support networks and resources exist for UK comic makers, but are not necessarily easy for the uninitiated to find. One simple but highly impactful action would be to increase their visibility.

- Pay and conditions for artists do not reflect the time and skill required to create comics. Funding opportunities are opaque and challenging to apply for. The rise of AI for illustration is already robbing artists of opportunities that would previously have provided them with income.

- The comics industry is a web of interdependent parts, including publishers, booksellers, festivals, museums, commentators and academics as well as creators. Each of them would benefit from collaborating and knowledge- sharing within the comics community and an overall uplift in the cultural impact of comics; each is suffering from the lack of investment in the field.

- To normalise the reading of comics and create wider audiences, we need to break into mainstream cultural channels.

- Efforts need to be made for all aspects of the comics community to be more inclusive of minoritised groups. We need to encourage best practice, better accessibility and proactively promote diversity, inclusion, and equality of opportunity.

- Resources could be provided to empower more people to self-organise, thus encouraging the creation of more change-making and activist groups, comics fairs, anthologies and localised support groups.

- Introducing more comics into our education curricula would help grow the next generation of comics readers and creators, as well as improving the overall acceptance of the comics artform. There is already strong evidence on the power of using comics in the classroom.

"A RISING TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS"

ROUNDTABLE EVENT

On January 16th 2024, we held an online event, and invited stakeholders from across the comics community and adjacent sectors to tell us what they perceive to be the main obstacles and potential solutions to a thriving comics culture within the UK.

More than 100 people attended: participants included comics creators both indie[3] and professional; representatives of publishers, museums, festivals, professional societies, booksellers, and comics community networks.

During the roundtable, participants were divided randomly into nine breakout rooms, where they were invited to discuss three questions:

- What would you like to see more/less of in the comics scene?
- What are the biggest obstacles you are facing currently?
- What is the most obvious opportunity being missed?

[3]A note about vocabulary: we could not settle on a satisfactory term to describe the significant number of people in the UK who create self-initiated comics projects outside their main job, and generally through self-publishing. In the context of this report, we have used 'indie' to avoid the use of 'amateur' (which has connotations of not being adept, while many have attained high levels of skill) and 'emerging' (which implies that eventually one attains the status of 'emerged'; not a clear given).
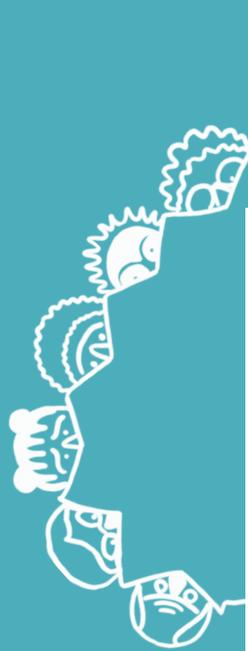
ROUNDTABLE EVENT

After the meeting, comments were gathered from the recordings of the meeting, a collaborative Jamboard, and the Zoom chat box; these were then grouped by topic.

COMMUNITY
- Resources
- Silos

FUNDING
- Funding for individuals
- Funding for organisations

OPPORTUNITIES
- Reaching new audiences
- Equity

INDUSTRY
- Publishing, agents and booksellers
- Pay and conditions
- Events and festivals

EDUCATION
- Comics as a way of learning
- Learning to make comics/research

CULTURAL IMPACT
- Language around comics
- Data and research

We recognise that many of these topics overlap. For example: events and festivals are an important aspect of the comics *community*, providing a place where creators can connect; they're also an *industry*, providing a living for those that run them; they're a route toward introducing comics to *new audiences*; and they significantly feed into the *cultural impact* of comics in this country.

A Venn diagram depicting all such overlaps would be a complex one; but this complexity also speaks to the diversity of opportunity and potential waiting to be unleashed within the comics sphere.

COMMUNITY

"WHAT DO I NEED TO THRIVE? JUST FINDING PEOPLE TO SHARE YOUR WORK WITH AND WHO LIKE WHAT YOU DO, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER IT MAKES MONEY."

Do people in comics think of themselves as being part of a community?

That perception seems to vary, depending on whether they have discovered the disparate but invaluable networks of support existing within the UK, from the online and in-person meetups offered by LDComics[4] and WIP[5]; to the mutual aid and support of the Cartoonist Cooperative[6], Association of Comics Creators[7] and Society of Authors Comics Creators Network[8]; to place-based local comics meetups[9] and online collectives[10].

[4] dcomics.com
[5] www.meetup.com/wipcomics
[6] cartoonist.coop
[7] aocc.global/
[8] www.societyofauthors.org/groups/comics-creators-network
[9] Such as www.cartooncounty.com
[10] Such as www.spiderforest.com

COMMUNITY

It will also be coloured by whether they attend or sell their wares at one of the 115+ comics festivals and events[11], large and small, that happen across the country each year, offering a place to meet and forge connections with other creators as well as providing sales opportunities.

The need for community was a major theme of the roundtable, expressed in every breakout room. Comics creators of all types recognised the immense value of peer support, networking, knowledge and resource sharing — and solidarity.

However, several attendees expressed that they had no knowledge of the various places where they could find information and support. These included people just setting out as comics creators, and people who were not creators themselves, but had an interest in tapping into the community — for example, a museum curator who would have liked to know where to find high-quality work and well-regarded creators for a comics exhibition.

New creators don't know which festivals are suitable for their work; which will welcome them; or even that they exist as an option for selling.

People 'don't know what they don't know' was the finding from many rooms, and this indicates an issue that affects creators in two ways — first, they may not find the support and opportunities available to them; and second, external actors who may be interested in commissioning work may not be able to find them; indeed, may not even be aware that comics are an answer to their needs.

Widespread though this issue appears to be, it may be relatively easy to solve with what one attendee described as "a simple web page or directory" — although we must not forget that web pages date; even thriving communities may eventually decline, and such a page or directory would need upkeep if it wasn't to meet the same fate as many before it, littered with broken links and woefully out of date. The work to build and maintain such directories deserves proper payment, as well — where does that come from?

To tackle the issue of 'outsiders' finding creators, a centralised database of artists, comics educators, editors, press/media was suggested: "A one-stop shop of information that is relevant, updated, and high quality — for example, comics educators that have enhanced DBS checks". Again, of course, this also takes ongoing moderation work.

[11] UK Comic Conventions 2023 Research by CCIC

COMMUNITY

Attendees shared some examples of where this sort of initiative already exists for specific types of creator[12].

What would participants like to see from a community? Across all rooms, the basic themes mentioned were:

- **Collaboration:** being a member of a community group means that you can more easily organise the anthologies or comics fairs that are difficult to manage alone

- **Knowledge-sharing,** with more experienced artists sharing wisdom to upskill younger ones

- Support with publicising launches

- **Shared connections** and networking

- A message board or hub

[12] cartoonistsofcolor.com, disabledcartoonists.com, queercartoonists.com

It's worth noting that these are all functions which are covered by existing communities, as linked to in the footnotes on page 6.

But communities do not run themselves; it was also suggested that more people need to take on organiser roles, and not just expect to step into an environment where everything is done for them.

And so, it would be valuable for CCIC to promote the understanding that comics people can self-organise, that self-publishing is an option, zine culture exists and the first steps into comics need not be expensive or daunting.

It's worth also noting, however, that most people in comics simply do not have the time or capacity to prioritise this sort of work unless it is paid. Hannah Berry ran a survey[13] across the comics community during her tenure as Comics Laureate which found that one in ten creators who consider comics to be their main job are only able to do it in their spare time.

Meanwhile, some individuals face more challenges than others in physically joining a community, though the growth of online networks and support has made that easier in a number of ways.

It was mentioned that some areas of the country are less well-served — rural areas are more difficult, and Scotland/Northern Ireland were mentioned in particular as being less covered in this respect. And while festivals are good for meeting and networking, it was mentioned several times that they can be too expensive or geographically distant for many to attend.

Those who are house/bed-bound through chronic illness can only play a part in the community or attend events if they are online or hybrid, and disabled people may have access needs for physical events[14].

[13] hannahberry.co.uk/survey
[14] Digital access checklist currently in development by CCIC
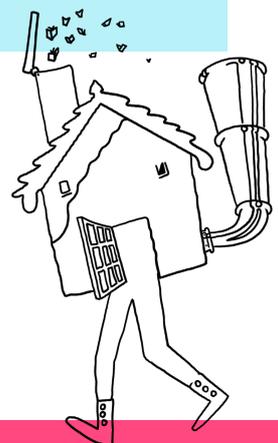
COMMUNITY:

RESOURCES

"Things that seem obvious to those who have been comics making for a while are daunting for beginners."

"Beginner comics artists know how to DRAW but beyond that it's all a mystery."

One important function of the comics community that was identified time and again by participants was as a provider of practical advice. People expressed that such resources are hard to find, especially if you don't know what you are looking for.

The kind of resources that people mentioned included:

• Places to find paid opportunities	• Fair pay advice: page rates and advances	• Practical workshops for those just starting out
• Legal advice on contracts, intellectual property and subject matter (eg how to avoid defamation)	• Sharing experiences and creating a community of safety.	• Business advice on how to market yourself, how to find an editor or agent
• "Simple things like how you print a comic, what awards are available, logistics like postal costs, crowdfunding".	• Lists of publications which accept reviews and how to approach them	• How to make a funding application

COMMUNITY:

RESOURCES

Again, it should be noted that practically all of these functions are provided by the networks and communities mentioned above; and the Society of Authors[15], which has a strong provision for comics creators[16], gives access to legal and contract advice for its members — and also has free resources for non-members.

COMICS CREATORS RECOGNISE THE IMMENSE VALUE OF PEER SUPPORT, NETWORKING, KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCE SHARING — AND SOLIDARITY.

[15] societyofauthors.org

[16] societyofauthors.org/groups/comics-creators-network
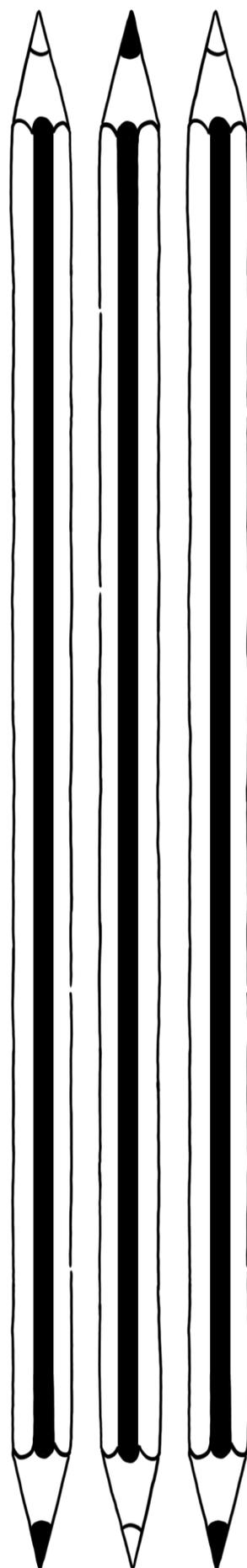
COMMUNITY:
SILOS

"IT'S HARD TO NETWORK WITH PEOPLE IN ARTS, THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH COMICS."

Within the wider topic of community, there were thoughts around silos — in our own circles, internally; across other areas of arts; and in society as a whole.

It's often wryly observed that comics people sell their wares to other comics people, with the profits from one table at a festival going into the profits of other tables, and vice versa. Part of getting widespread recognition for the cultural value of comics means breaking out of that cycle.

In the wider world, graphic novels are seen as something distinct to other books: this is exemplified by the fact there are 'comics' or 'graphic novels'' sections in bookshops, when the comics form is a *medium* rather than a genre in and of itself.

And within the medium there are further silos: "Media discussions of comics talks about superhero comics or manga, without acknowledgement that they're all the same medium", said one participant, speaking to the fact that there's not enough widespread understanding of the craft of comics making and that the fundamentals of this craft can be applied across a variety of forms.

Even within the comics community there are perceived schisms. People who make zines and people who make comics for kids, both expressed that they felt their disciplines were looked down upon, or seen as lesser, by their peers.

It was widely thought that bridges need to be built within the comics community, with the wider art community and with the "world outside the comics bubble".

There are many opportunities for forging links with other industries and fields — the Graphic Medicine[17] movement has shown the value of comics within the health sphere; the organisation PositiveNegatives[18] demonstrates how comics can complement academia; and comics have been used to good effect within journalism. We need to identify and grow other such opportunities.

[17]graphicmedicine.org [18]positivenegatives.org
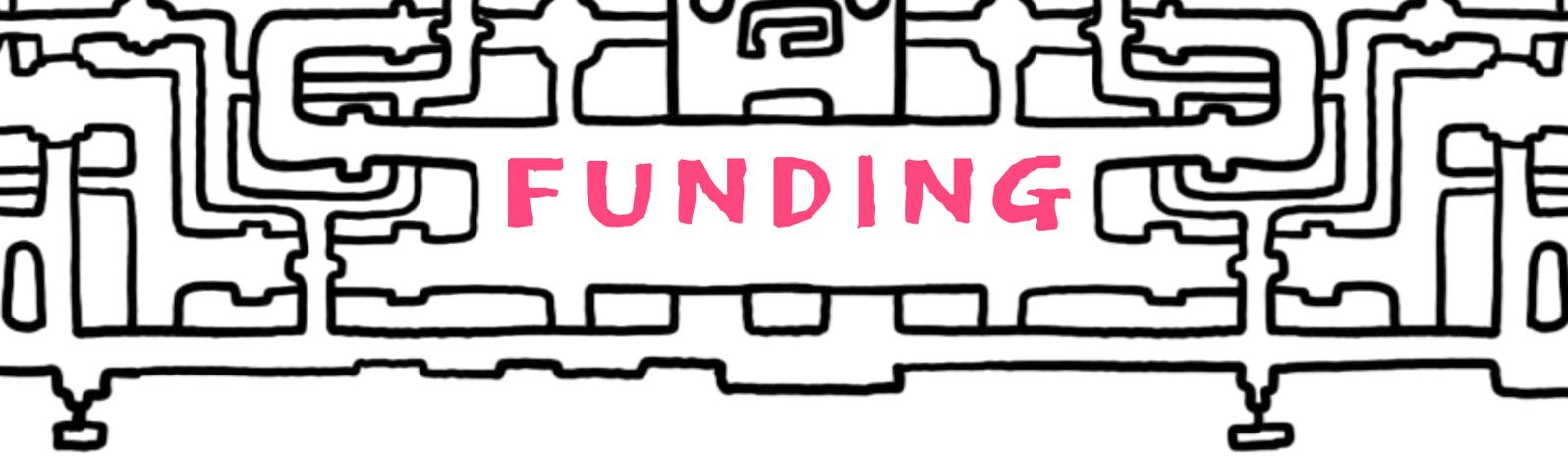
FUNDING

In the current political and financial landscape, all arts are suffering; but comics have the additional issue that they were poorly recompensed to begin with. The struggle to sustain a career is harder than ever, as was reflected across multiple conversations in the roundtable.

"EVEN A GOOD ADVANCE ISN'T A SUBSTITUTE FOR A WAGE."
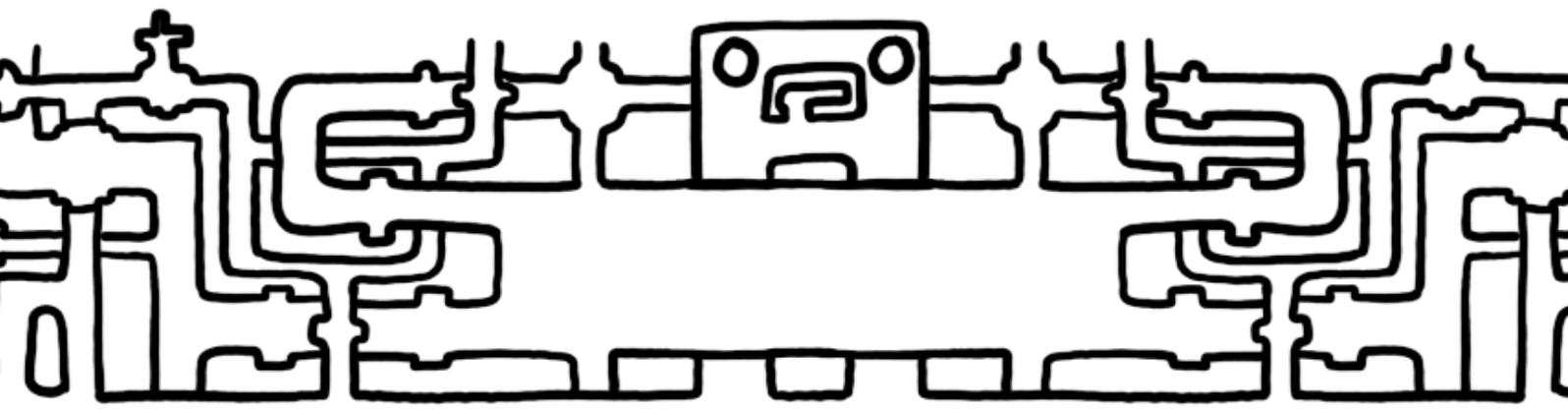
FUNDING:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Making comics is a very time-consuming practice. While speed varies according to style, even amongst professional comics creators per-hour pay is likely not to reach the equivalent of minimum wage.

Publishers' contracts, far from being the financial solution, often do little more than add the pressure of a deadline. One attendee remarked, "An advance rarely supports a creator for the time it takes to make a graphic novel".

In the indie and self-publishing communities, it's widely recognised that the true rewards of comic-making are not financial — and this is often the sad realisation of a published graphic novelist receiving their royalties statement, too.

But this shouldn't be the case: comics making is a skilled art and one of CCIC's aims is to increase recognition of this fact, pushing for a model where better recompense is possible.

As became clear from our roundtable participants, who came from a range of different parts of the industry, it is not as simple as publishers paying creators better. Publishers are facing their own constraints and challenges, as we will see in the Industry section.

And those difficulties are seen in every component of the comics community: a well-known platform for indie comics reviews said that hosting it cost £2,000 each year, currently coming out of the proprietor's own pocket.

Work needs to be done to boost the entire cultural landscape in order to improve opportunities for all sides.
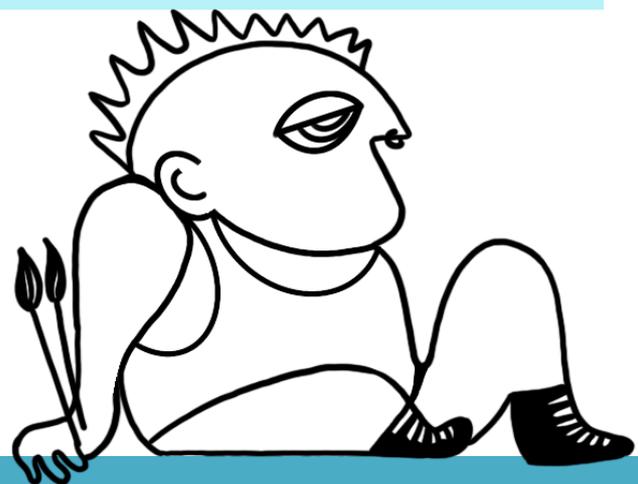
FUNDING:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

If publishers can't help, what other routes are available to creators? Self-publishing is a viable path for indie comics creators, and has none of the stigma that more conventional literary forms seem to attach to it; something that the comics scene shares with poetry and photography.

Beyond publishing, the current options for self-funding a comic are one, or a mix, of the following:

- Self-funding — paying for printing, marketing and distribution costs oneself and hoping to recoup them from profits

- Crowdfunding such as through Kickstarter

- Applying for grant funding

Each has its own drawbacks.

Among those who were aware of it, grant funding such as that offered by Arts Council England was mentioned several times as a huge hurdle, even while creators recognised its value. In 2023, CCIC ran an online survey to find out more about the rate of application and barriers faced by potential applicants. The resulting report[19] contains statistics and several testimonies which starkly illustrate the difficulties with applying for comics funding:

22.1%	23.5%	33.2%
Found the process confusing	Said the process is too laborious	Found it too intimidating

[19]CCIC Comics funding survey report 2023
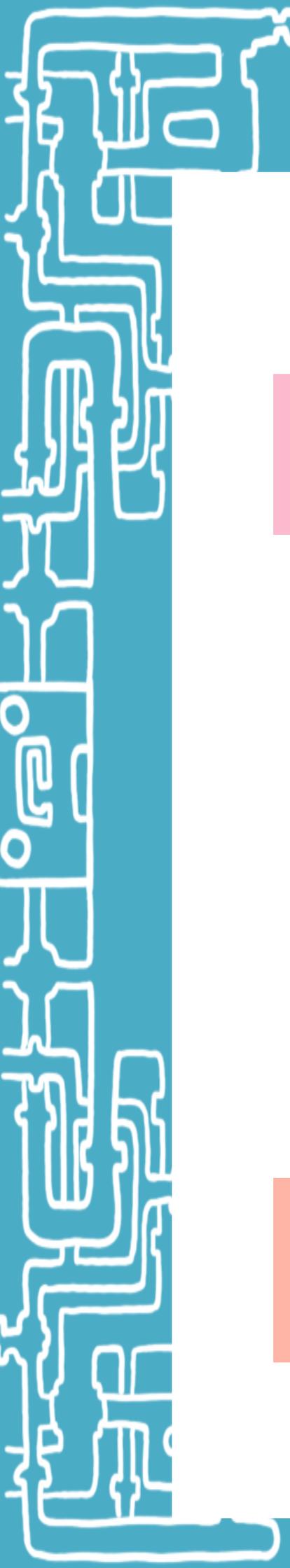
FUNDING:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Meanwhile, at the roundtable, several creators remarked that they weren't aware of any funding opportunities. Those who knew of them expressed several frustrations: "conditions are too opaque", and "it is difficult to navigate the application process" being the most common of these.

There was a sense that if the applicant didn't use the right language, the whole endeavour was pointless, while others said that applying for grants took a lot of time and effort that could have been better channelled into making their art.

It was felt that grantmakers themselves could benefit from better understanding of comics. They are "not very knowledgeable about the artform and what comics could be," said one, while another suggested they "would like to see more comics creators involved in the process of giving the funding out, because they are knowledgeable about the artform."

Finally, they would like grantmakers to have more awareness of what the application process is like for those approaching it with little or no knowledge of the systems. Artists should not have to become experts on ACE's internal workings, or on dated web navigation, before they can apply, and just tackling the online procedures is a burden.

"Grantium [the ACE online application form] is awful - it's like a piece of software from the early 90s. I would prefer an interface that is more intuitive and follows the best usability practice".

It was also noted that by making the application system a challenge, grantmakers are excluding those with less education, confidence or online abilities.

CCIC research identified that comics projects receive a significantly smaller proportion of ACE funding than other artforms[20], though it is as yet unclear whether this indicates a lack of recognition by the Arts Council of the form's value, or a mismatch between the Arts Council's framework and the needs of a typical comics project.

[20] https://bit.ly/3YZthy1
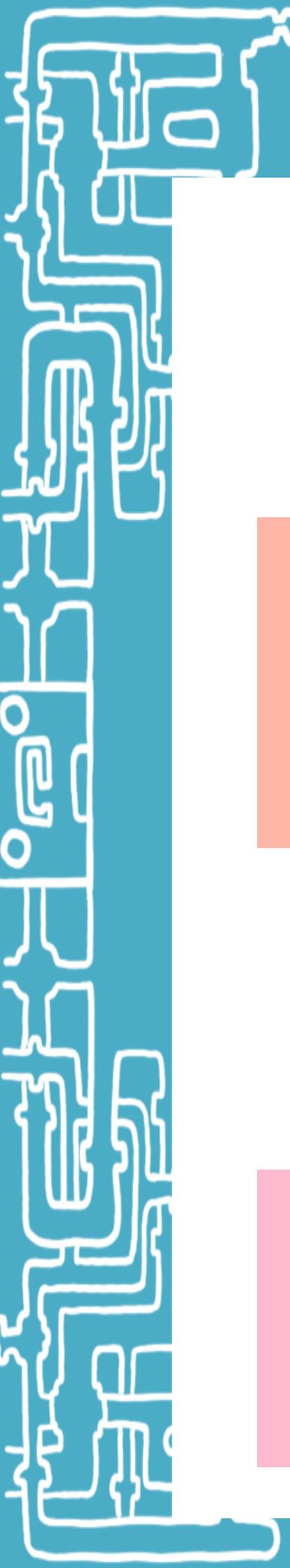
FUNDING:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

One roundtable attendee asked, "Where does comics fall under ACE classification? Combined arts? Literature?" while another noted that "the interdisciplinary nature of comics should be a *plus* for seeking ACE or academic funding".

ACE is not the only arts funding available, of course, but it is the best known and potentially the most significant in size. As one would expect, several people stated that they would like to see more funding opportunities, or for those available to be easier to discover.

One useful function that CCIC might play is to signal the existence of grants outside the arts sector but nonetheless potentially ripe for comics projects — such as funding for heritage projects, academic funding or health outcomes, for example. When suggesting possible solutions to the issue of funding a longterm comics project, several participants speculated that a Universal Basic Income would benefit everyone in the creative arts. Similarly, the normalisation of a four day week for the 'day job', often the means by which artists subsidise their creative work, would free up time and energy — but these are major societal changes that will require more than CCIC's advocacy to bring about.

Meanwhile, a shift in the understanding of the many contexts in which comics can be deployed is a more achievable aim. Elsewhere in this report we have seen the benefits of moving beyond the 'comics bubble', thinking of comics as more than an artform in and of itself.

There are creative options for getting funding for comics, such as collaborating with academics or even corporations to tell stories that they need telling; comics journalism et cetera. In 2018, Karrie Fransman listed many of the possibilities in an article for Broken Frontier[21].

CCIC can play an important role by encouraging both sides — comics creators and external industries — to understand the potential of comics to convey information and meaning in every context. One attendee pulled out an airline safety card to demonstrate that when we want to tell people something in a way that everyone can understand, whatever their reading comprehension level or language ability, we use sequential illustration. The same can be said for flatpack assembly instructions. This being the case, comics can take on almost infinite utility, in any industry, organisation or sphere where communication is valued.

21 www.brokenfrontier.com/karrie-fransman-living-comics-artists-pitching-publishers

FUNDING:

FOR INDIVIDUALS

"There is money in business," one participant speculated, and comics artists should be well recompensed for their ability to put messages across succinctly, effectively and attractively. The challenge is to help those businesses understand that comics are desirable and accessible.

We should note that at the time of writing, we are at the beginning of an AI revolution, one aspect of which is that it has become trivial for non-artists to generate illustrations with simple prompts. We are already seeing the use of AI-generated illustrations in contexts where previously an artist would have been employed — and paid. While the future is unknown, it seems clear that opportunities for living artists are already being lost to the lure of cheap technologies.

AI generated imagery is problematic in other ways too, including the fact that it is built on the non-consensual use of artists' own intellectual property; and that it has been shown to perpetuate biases such as racism.

While at the moment we consider best practice to be that AI imagery is not used in commercial settings, we understand that we are at the beginning of a fast-moving revolution, and we commit to a regular assessment of how artists themselves are working with the technology, and how this is being reflected across society.

We have expertise in this area among CCIC's board members, and are already engaging with outputs from organisations like Careful Trouble. As a community we strongly believe we need to be part of a civic society who fosters a 'people first' approach to how we use AI and machine learning in the arts and beyond.
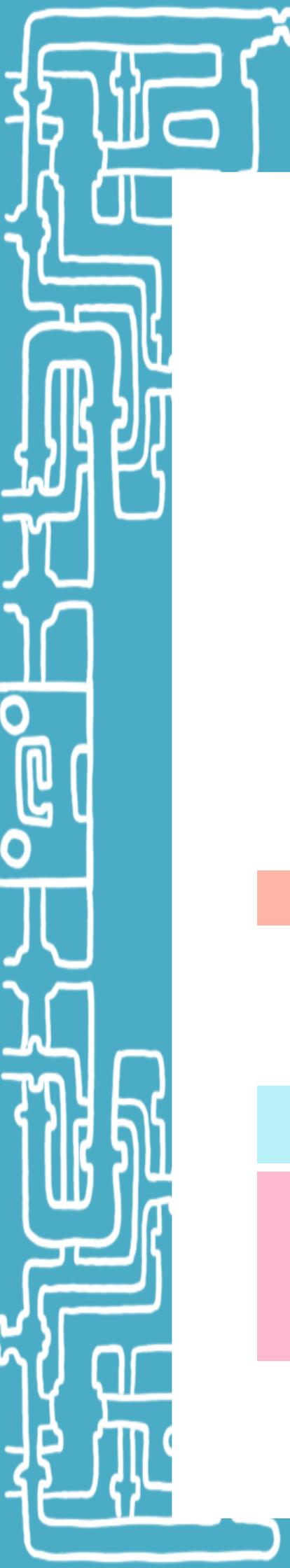
FUNDING:

FOR ORGANISATIONS

The comics community is more than just the comics makers. Organisations such as museums, festivals and publications dedicated to the artform both benefit from, and support, the creators — and they face their own struggles with funding.

Among roundtable attendees were representatives of the UK's most significant comics festivals.

"Money and sponsorship is something that is always a huge concern", said one, adding that "we spend most of our time trying to get funding; we are constantly trying to get it in different ways."

Another noted that austerity has dwindled the amount of funding available, and has failed to keep up with inflation.

In a business-oriented world, it was suggested, arts organisations (and individual creators) need to change their language. Those in charge "do not care about improving lives or the value of art: they care about a return on investment."

CCIC could usefully gather the data to demonstrate the ROI of comics.

One breakout room within the roundtable discussed means of funding beyond public grants. It might be of benefit to explore private investment. Again, the issue of visibility arose: "Investors would be more interested if they knew we existed".

Both individuals and organisations expressed that they would like to see training on accessing funding from different sources.

Sharing our knowledge is essential. "Comics are seen as 'sexy' by social outcomes funders," said one. "However, there is a lack of training and support to make this a credible field at present," and "many organisations and individuals are doing similar work without sharing best practice, resources, or working in consortia."

OPPORTUNITIES
REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

31%

of adults have read or do read comics[22]

[22]Prof Andrew Miles' study at University of Manchester, 2023 (pending publication). Further details of this study will be made available at everydayparticipation.org.

40.3%

of young people read comics[23]
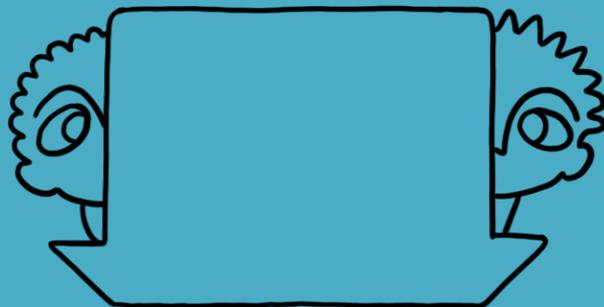
[23]The National Literacy Trust Research Report. children and young people's reading engagement in 2022.

OPPORTUNITIES:

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

While these figures can be regarded optimistically, we only have to look across the channel to France and Belgium to understand that a better comics culture is possible.

In these countries, every bookshop, and even neighbourhood newsagents, dedicate considerable shelf space to the graphic novels that are read, without stigma, by adults and children alike. Entire museums are dedicated to venerated comics artists; railway waiting rooms are decorated with comics strips and murals several storeys high celebrate the work of comics creators. Festivals such as Angoulême bring millions to their region in tourism and trade benefits, as creators, readers and publishers flock to share their appreciation of the artform.

CCIC seeks to help foster the conditions that will allow a similar culture to flourish within the UK, lobbying for recognition and support, and aiding where possible initiatives that forward this aim.

But how do we get there? One clear need, echoed by attendees across all breakout rooms at the roundtable, is to expand audiences for comics and graphic novels in the UK. Coupled with this was a perceived need to normalise comics and bring them into the fabric of our everyday arts consumption. ce where people go to find the work that people put out there."

Comments included:

"EVERY LIBRARY IN THE COUNTRY SHOULD HAVE A REALLY BIG SELECTION OF COMICS."

"WHY ARE WE NOT ON BREAKFAST TV? "

It was suggested that we need "a good face to advocate for comics in pop culture — someone who can do what Quentin Blake has done to promote illustration."

OPPORTUNITIES:

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

While a couple of national newspapers offer a regular column reviewing graphic novels, coverage is by no means mainstream or widespread. Nor do many newspapers include the comics strip pull-out that was once a mainstay — possibly because, in the digital age, it is harder to hand your children a cartoon supplement. The National Literacy Trust report[24] shows that comics are the preferred medium for young people when reading online, but do parents know where to find them?

Established literary podcasts and radio shows might occasionally dedicate a 'special' to graphic novels, but they are given substantially less airtime than 'standard' literature, rather than, as would be desirable, mixing graphic novels in with other types of book.

Meanwhile, it was remarked that there are several 'indie-level' podcasts on the topic of comics, and that it is not difficult to have one's comics reviewed or discussed on such platforms — but for many of these listenership is small and rarely breaks through the comics bubble. The exception may be Dan Berry's now discontinued *Make It Then Tell Everybody* which had almost three million listeners — but still spoke almost entirely to other comics creators. It should be noted that this important source of learning for the comics community, while still available in archive form, has left a gap.

To break out of our own bubble, roundtable participants would like to see a "regular mainstream radio review show focusing purely on zines and comics", and it was suggested that more public-facing comics awards would bring more media attention, too.

Reviews are one thing: ensuring comics reach the hands of readers is another. When creators sell at festivals, as mentioned, it is felt that the audience is broadly made up of other comics creators, or at best, readers who are already comics fans.

To reach new audiences, we need to sell in bookshops, and, it was suggested, to look for other 'non comics' opportunities such as craft fairs and music festivals.

[24]National Literacy Trust 'Our new research shows that reading both in print and on screens benefits children's literacy'.
https://literacytrust.org.uk/news/digital-reading-axe-the-reading-tax/

OPPORTUNITIES:

REACHING NEW AUDIENCES

Even independent bookshops appear to be unaware of much of what is available. "Small press and cheaply made comics are overlooked by bookshops in the UK - and so they are missing so many amazing things being made here."

One opportunity that has opened up for a small but growing number of comics creators is for their work to be picked up and adapted into film or TV series. The growth of streaming services has increased the demand for stories, and comics offer a well developed story that is often filmic in nature, with story arcs, characters and settings already in place. However, it was noted that "The film industry doesn't acknowledge where these ideas came from" — and negotiating fair rights is a skillset that should only be done through an agent.

Two other artforms were suggested as areas we can learn from: poetry and photography have both, it was suggested, enjoyed an increased user base and a flourishing of activity. What can the comics community learn from them? Photography is similarly "not considered fine art", but practitioners are reaching audiences through pop-up exhibitions and zines, and are now finding their work making its way into a gallery context.

Web comics were also mentioned as an opportunity that is missed by comics artists who put their work out via more traditional means. Publication is cheap or free, and they attract a large, mainly younger readership — perhaps filling the gap left by booksellers unable to reach their markets.

Again, it was noted that by opening new industries' and businesses' eyes to the potential of using comics, a wider number of people would become exposed to the artform, reaping the benefits of normalisation.

Finally, one participant offered that "other art forms have theatres or galleries, et cetera — a place for connecting artists to audiences that is not mediated by commerce. We don't have a centralised space where people go to find the work that people put out there."

OPPORTUNITIES:

EQUITY

> ## "SO MUCH TALENT IS OVERSHADOWED DUE TO BARRIERS TO ACCESS."

While we are noting obstacles for all comics creators, we must recognise that these are multiplied, for some, by the other challenges or disadvantages they face in life.

One attendee spoke of "invisible barriers on presenting yourself for funding/pitching". Many mentioned the need for more opportunities for minority creators - the SelfMadeHero mentorship scheme was praised, but there is room for many more such initiatives.

People would also like to see more diversity in awards, and speakers in panels at festivals. All-white, all-male line ups have rightly become a thing of the past in many other arenas, and yet they still persist in the comics world.

This spreads beyond events: "Gender bias is getting worse in the major comics industries", one attendee explained, and it was noted that "even in community-building, women tend to do the labour".

A higher number of comics creators identify as D/deaf or disabled than within the UK population[25] and anecdotal evidence — we aim to collect more robust statistics soon — suggests that creators are far more likely than the national average to be neurodivergent.

As noted previously, festivals and conventions are inaccessible to many unless provisions are made to include them: one chronically ill attendee called for "hybrid events, otherwise I can't take part at all", and another pointed out that professional events need to make themselves more accessible by being "low cost or free, COVID-safe, virtual, disabled-friendly, etc".

These considerations must be reflected in working practices, too. One noted difficulty in "keeping up with the general pace expected of comics artists, as a disabled artist who needs more time than most to complete projects."

Finally, it was noted that marginalised communities may extend beyond the categories that immediately come to mind when we consider addressing inequalities. "Older people are one of the minority creator categories! Working class as well - both categories are often overlooked in EDI initiatives" was one comment.

[25] Hannah Berry's UK Comics Creators survey
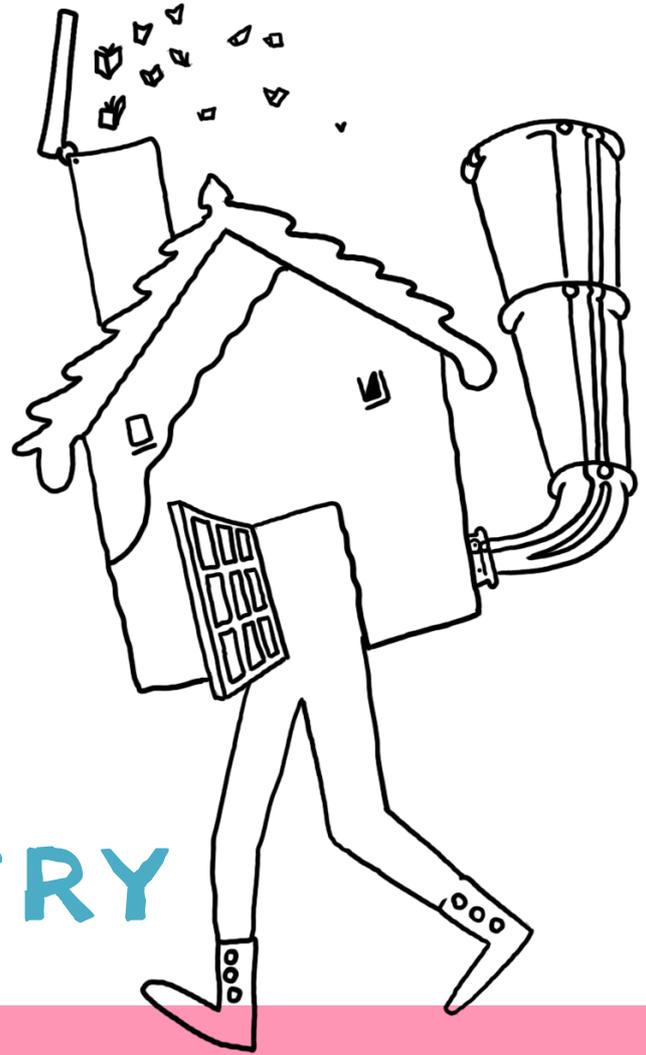
INDUSTRY

As we've noted, the comics industry is made up of interdependent categories of people and activity. To create opportunity and a thriving comics culture, we need a robust comics industry and infrastructure in place — one where publishers, agents, events, distributors, marketers and bookstores all play their parts. In turn, these players need the money to survive, innovate and to support or nurture creators.

INDUSTRY:

PUBLISHING, AGENTS AND BOOKSELLERS

"EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT A COMIC IS IN THE UK— THE BEANO, SUPERHEROES, THESE ARE EVERYWHERE IN OUR CULTURE, AND MOVIES BASED ON COMICS ARE MAKING BILLIONS".

Among the roundtable attendees were representatives from publishers and booksellers, large and small. Their views were a valuable complement to the voices of the many creators present: the concerns of one group may not be fully understood by the other, but they all overlap. Shared understanding across the industry would be a valuable outcome from CCIC's activities.

One publisher remarked that in general, graphic novels have a small readership but high costs of production — so it's hard to break even on them, let alone make profit. Clearly, interventions to increase audiences would also increase demand here.

Small and independent presses such as Avery Hill do a lot of the heavy lifting of discovering new creators and getting their work out to the world; but by their nature, they can only do so for a handful each year. Attendees would like to see many more such presses, and see the need for "funding to start a new imprint or publishing house".

It was noted that these small publishers work harder for their creators, with the comment being made that "the difference between what traditional publishers will do vs comics publishers is stark."

Either way, participants said they would like to see "more mainstream marketing/PR for comics", drawing the comparison that "literary writers spend three years promoting books — going round venues etc. Spending longer promoting comics would be nice".

At a more basic level, can we "do more to encourage [non-comics] publishers to understand the potential of comics"?

INDUSTRY:

PUBLISHING, AGENTS AND BOOKSELLERS

Within the publishing houses, one insider noted that there is currently a "lack of transfer of experience, or apprenticeships, in the editorial, etc stages - so they are losing expertise. In publishing we need editors who know what comics are and how they work. There is little editorial expertise out there".

Meanwhile, creators also spoke of the barriers they perceived in trying to work with publishers, agents and booksellers.

"That comics purchasing [in bookshops] is done mostly via Diamond is a big barrier," said one, and, "we need a spreadsheet for small press creators, so booksellers can find out how to stock their books. There are loads of teeny tiny comics retailers that could easily sell these small press books."

One attendee who had spoken to the owner of a small independent bookshop conveyed their thoughts: they are stretched and do not have capacity to learn what is available or popular beyond the most mainstream comics and graphic novels. A monthly comics guide data on comics sales from someone who knows the scene well would be of great use to them.

As for larger retailers, one participant said, "I would love Waterstones to understand comics a bit more; there's not much engagement outside of what Guardian might cover. They don't seem to fully understand the artform, and there are fewer recommendations or face-out displays of comics than there are of other types of books".

At the same time, another said, "The comics situation in bookshops and WH Smith is actually the best it's been for years. I'd like to acknowledge that."

When it comes to having work published, there's a perceived bottleneck, with room for only a few fortunate creators to break through: "I would like to see more opportunities for comics creators. There's a massive number of people making comics, often in the misguided belief that there are enough publishers or opportunities awaiting them — but there are far more creators than can attain any sort of living out of comics."

Comics is a creative artform that benefits from the diversity of approaches and outputs — but it might be argued that some comics are more marketable than others. Equally, creators' pitches to publishers or agents will be more compelling if they understand the needs of the market.

INDUSTRY:

PUBLISHING, AGENTS AND BOOKSELLERS

"Early career creators do not know how to engage with publishers/agents," said one participant. "There needs to be a 'Publishing Pathway' accessibility scheme that breaks down different avenues by which creators can garner income or be self sustainable."

Contracts were again identified as a pain point, with agents playing a very valuable role: "Negotiating terrible contracts as an individual is extremely hard, and not having someone whose job it is to play 'bad cop' is part of what keeps wages suppressed and terms exploitative."

But where can such agents be found? "Many agents don't even want to take on comics creators as the pay is so low it isn't worth their commissions", it was remarked.

Creators said that they find it hard to attract the attention of publishers and agents alike; and there are not enough who have an interest in comics. "Finding agents who want to work with graphic novel and comics creators" was stated by several attendees as an obstacle; but "it's hard to get a fair contract without representation" and we "need more agents who represent comickers".

"It's a snake eating its own tail. If more agents would take us on as clients then we'd have a [small chance] of raising fees and getting rid of some of the terms that make these contracts so terrible."

Indeed, one comment referred to "horrifyingly awful contract terms - almost across the board" — which takes us neatly on to the next section.
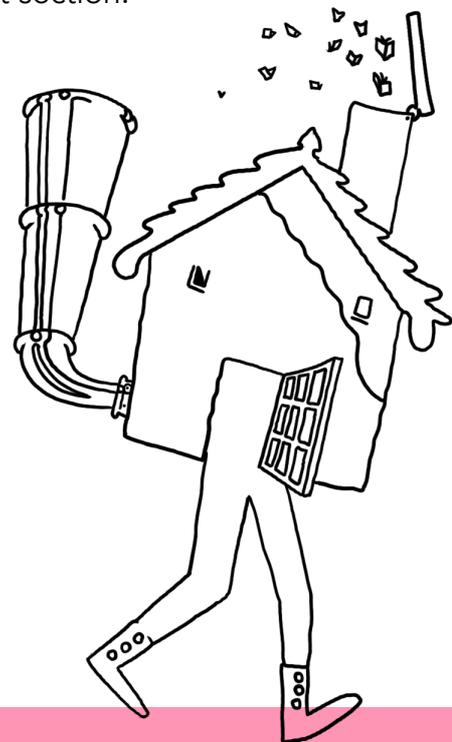
INDUSTRY:
PAY AND CONDITIONS

A full-time job making comics is, for most, simply not a financially sustainable option.

Whether income comes from in-house employment, publishers' contracts, royalties or commissions, the same theme was echoed multiple times across the roundtable: most comics work does not pay enough to sustain creators.

When asked what they need to thrive, creators replied, "money", "financial stability", "time to think without thinking about money", and "stable housing".

Most (87%) creators[26] have a day job to support their comics work, which they then have to cram into evenings and weekends. The challenge? As one creator put it, "Figuring out how to make enough money to live, while still dedicating myself to comics, while also not burning out or losing balance with life."

For those whose comics are suitable, income can be supplemented — or books promoted — with visits to schools and bookshops. But it was noted that "there is a lack of pay/equity for creators who visit independent booksellers/shops. The model has changed over the past few years due to lobbying from Bookseller Associations, but there is still large inequity", and "many creators cannot afford to travel to bookshops etc".

On the topic of creators going into schools, it was noted that "many practitioners struggle to charge, while some will charge £250-£500 per visit". At the same time, there was recognition that schools are suffering economic constraints in the current environment.

One solution suggested was the transparent sharing, by creators, of their rates of pay. This would enable everyone to see, and learn from, the amounts being earned.

The Creators Rights Alliance was recommended. They offer advice on calculating rates and fees[27] and tables to calculate a freelance day rate[28].

Finally, creators would benefit from solidarity: "I'd like to see more unionisation amongst cartoonists," said one participant. "I'm in the US, and we're not allowed to unionise as freelancers, so I'd like to see that changed. Hope this is different outside the US!"

[26] Hannah Berry's UK Comics Creators survey
[27] Creators Rights Alliance Resources for calculating rates and fees
[28] Creators Rights Alliance Freelance day rate guide.
See also Guidance on fees and day rates for visual artists 2021

INDUSTRY:

EVENTS AND FESTIVALS

There was much appreciation for our comics events in the UK, both large and small. They're places to get inspiration, to make new connections, to sell our work and to immerse ourselves in the artform we love — but, especially for the less-established creators, they can also be a financial drain, a risk in terms of travel and accommodation expenses, table fees, and taking time off work.

There was warm recognition for the major comics events and the work they do. "Big kudos to events like Thought Bubble and The Lakes. They are doing good".

Attendees also saw the massive value of smaller, local events, wishing there were "more lower-stakes cons, so we have more chances to make money without spending hundreds up front", and "more shows and conventions in accessible locations — affordable to reach, etc."

Selling at a major event often costs more than one earns. "So many creators aren't making their table fees back". It was suggested that more could be done by the events to support creators through their large audiences and communications channels: "the lack of PR is killing small press creators".

Some people find it hard to reach the events at all. "Mainstream festivals in the UK are difficult for marginalised population groups to access and attend", while for the less well-off, "the biggest barrier is the cost of transport — or the lack of funding to cover them".

A further comment was that "many festivals will offer piecemeal bursaries for creators who are economically deprived, but do not advertise these in an equitable way. More so 'after the fact'. It's disheartening. Especially for early stage career creators."

Events and festivals could be doing much more to support access to disabled people. While it was recognised that some festivals had put in place measures to address some inequalities some of the time, it was felt there was a "lack of true EDI principles", with access being an afterthought rather than a true priority. Accessibility is often paid lip service — or in the worst cases, not considered at all.
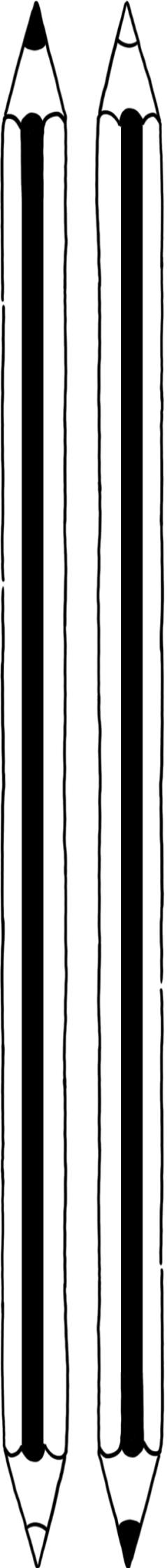
"Comics are an amazing literacy aid. It's so easy to get kids to read them with great enthusiasm."

EDUCATION
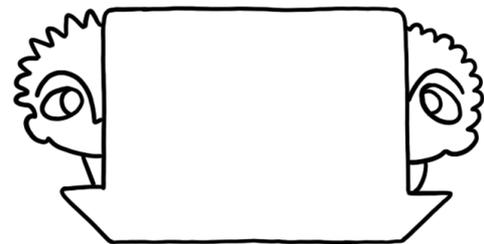
Education emerged as a major theme at the roundtable: it was recognised that a love of comics often starts in childhood and that we, as a field, should be capitalising on this. Schools were frequently cited as a route into expanding our audiences - get 'em while they're young and instil a lifelong love of comics.

One attendee who makes comics for young readers described themselves as "creating the next generation of readers for adult graphic novels".

There is also potential for comics to be used to support learning; research[29] shows that they can be more accessible than written books for many young readers, and the unique picture/words format can convey complex ideas.

The roundtable also included representatives from academia, who study the art of comics — either as a subject for their research, or as illustration/sequential design students, learning how to create work.

[29] Comic Art Europe, Andrew Miles *Comics and Literacy* 2023
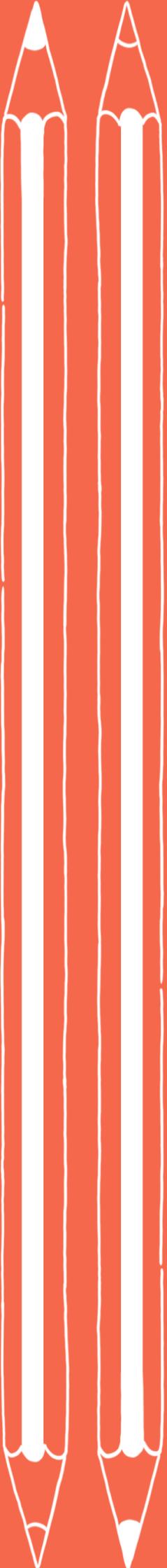
EDUCATION:
COMICS AS A WAY OF LEARNING

Comic Art Europe's *Comics and Literacy* research[30] in four different European contexts noted "a very positive impact of comics on literacy". The National Literacy Trust said that they in their forthcoming report they will be able, for the first time, to link children reading comics to attainment levels.

Meanwhile, the many benefits of comics in all kinds of classroom were mentioned:

"Comics are an amazing literacy aid. It's so easy to get kids to read them with great enthusiasm."

"Comics can be helpful and engaging for people for whom English is not their first language."

"I work with the Deaf/hard of hearing community. Reams of paper is boring, it's better to explain with comics, they get a better reaction/response."

But despite these first hand experiences showing the value of comics as a learning aid, there are hurdles to be overcome, mostly around how comics are perceived. A bookseller said;

"I really have to battle teachers and librarians to embrace our artform. They are very scared of it."

"If the teachers and the parents push back then the kids don't come in. If you introduce kids at an early age then they usually stick with it."

It was noted that it is harder to get funding for running comics projects with children:

"We can get money more easily for projects involving, for example, poems than comics."

[30] Comic Art Europe, Andrew Miles *Comics and Literacy* 2023

Aside from their value as a learning tool, in UK schools, the art of making comics is not routinely introduced as a creative activity, a source of pleasure, or an artform from which to learn. At primary and secondary levels, "the school curriculum does not value or even mention comics!"

One attendee would like to see "comics included in state school Art lessons — and also in other subjects"; and "kids should know there are career options in comics, such as storyboarding, film and other industries".

"Can we bring comics into schools as a literary artform?" asked one participant. "I learned about the techniques behind *Maus* at school and it really broadened my mind".

As for higher level education, a postgrad student said, "comics are not seen as a serious academic subject. They don't fit within English or Art[28]. It is not an obvious subject to people outside of comics. Not many see the power it has to open up different pathways/gateways."

Consequently, the money isn't there: "There's no funding for academic studies of comics. And there's an idea that if no-one is funding it, the subject is not important. It's a vicious circle because if people don't see work out there, they assume it's not a valid subject."

This was linked to the lack of value comics have in wider society: "If the artform itself isn't funded, that has a knock-on effect to academia as well - it's not legitimised".

Several attendees knew of research that had been published in comics form, something they would like to see more of. "I'd love to see more journals accepting comics submissions", said one, and "Some journals will have a comics graphic at the start of a paper to explain, but that's it. I would like being able to draw to become as highly valued and normalised a skill as writing papers".
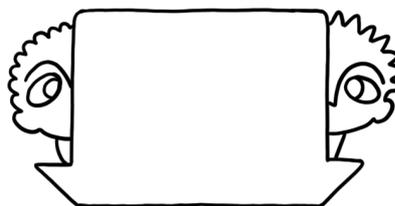
[31] Although, we have heard anecdotally of university courses beginning to add comics to their reading lists; and work that would fall under the Graphic Medicine label being used to educate medical students.
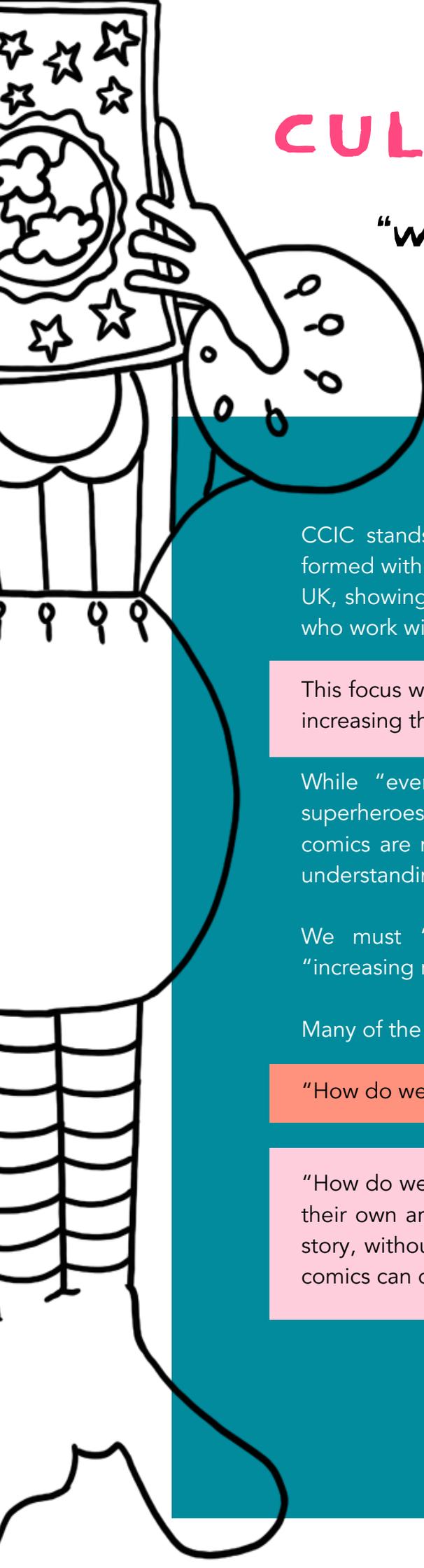
CULTURAL IMPACT

"what do I need to thrive? RECOGNITION"

CCIC stands for *The Comics Cultural Impact Collective*, and we were formed with a vision about creating a more viable culture for comics in the UK, showing the value of the industry and increasing opportunities for all who work within it.

This focus was recognised across the breakout rooms, with a real thirst for increasing the recognition of comics in the UK.

While "everyone knows what a comic is in the uk — the Beano, superheroes, these are everywhere in our culture, and movies based on comics are making billions", there is still work to be done to widen this understanding.

We must "create more awareness of cultural impact", while also "increasing respect. In France comics are known as "the 9th art".

Many of the challenges were worded as questions:

"How do we broaden the passion in comics out into the wider world?"

"How do we increase cultural recognition of graphic novels and comics as their own artform? Reviews tend to regard them purely as a book with a story, without proper understanding of the unique features and craft that comics can contain."

CULTURAL IMPACT

Several needs were mentioned:

"More companies like channel 4, etc, to support, mentor and nurture creators."

"Comics journalism needs more money!"

"More public facing awards for comics, embraced by book retail with public advertising campaigns and media."

"Get in people's faces by being of service, being used by the scientific community, factual, instructional. We are the great explainers — capitalise on this. We are vital and useful!"

"More coverage of comics in mainstream/ traditional media like tv, magazines, newspapers."

"More comics everywhere - in mainstream press, on walls as massive murals."

"More emphasis on comics not being a juvenile media or just for kids."

CULTURAL IMPACT

Part of the cultural value of an artform is reflected in how it is preserved for future generations. An attendee from a museum noted that we need

"a better-funded, more inclusive archiving system for comics from indie creators — a lot gets lost over the decades."

There needs to be a nationwide recognition that comics are worth holding onto, not just ephemeral.

"This needs more funding: there are people who already believe in their worth. There are a few places that archive but not enough."
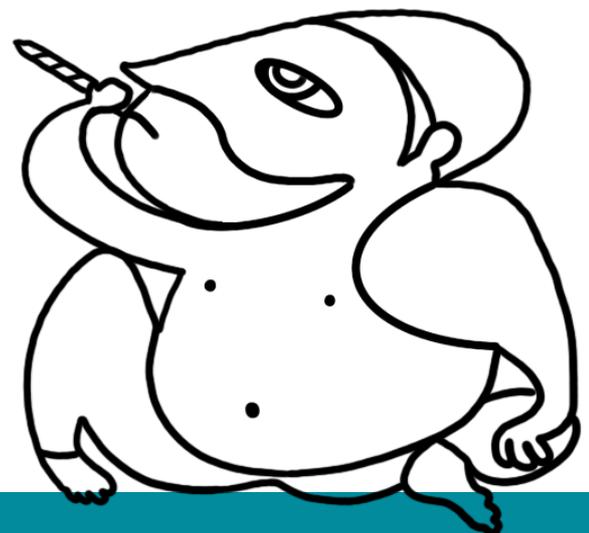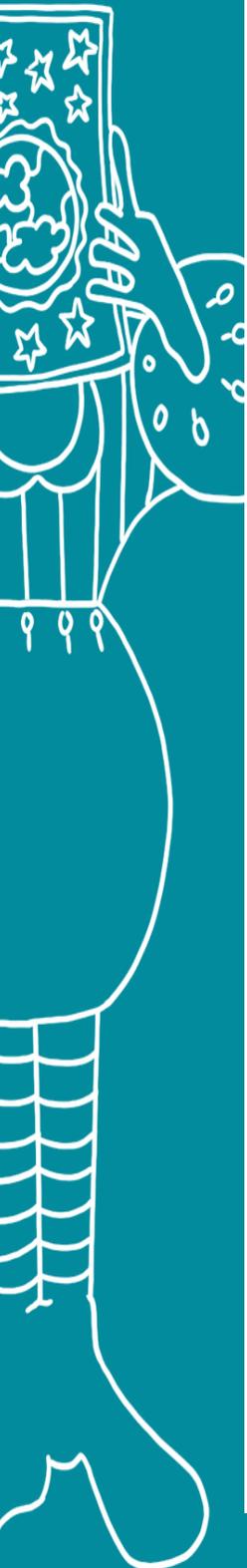
Is the field held back because of the perceptions caused by our own language? Several remarks supported this view:

"Perhaps the term *comics* is not a good description of what we do. In France, they call them 'drawn strips' [*bandes dessinées*]. There's a perception of what comics is that doesn't include all genres."

In practical terms, it was felt like the language used might affect one's chances at winning grants:

"Which terms are more fundable or accessible? Graphic Novels? Comics? Sequential art?" and "should it be categorised as a practice or a medium?"

And finally, there is work to be done in cataloguing and naming:

"Comics, graphic novels, puzzle books and picture books all fall within the same category within libraries, and their budget is spread across them. They [should be] distinct categories rather than an umbrella term."
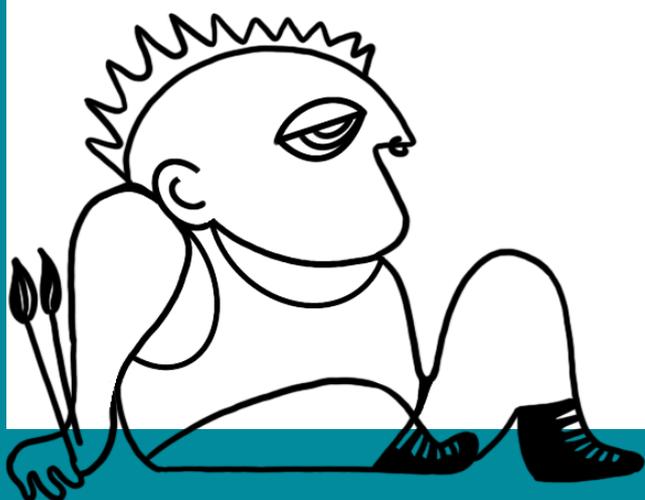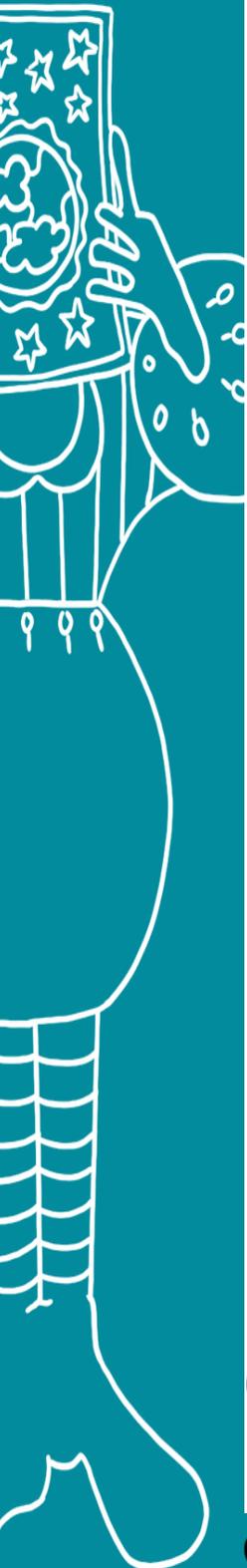
CCIC's approach thus far has been to gather statistics and research to help understand the current landscape — this will help us to make informed decisions about how to progress. The value of data was recognised by attendees, whose suggestions included:

"More large scale research that supports the argument for more comics in schools".

"I would like more data to help with funding."

"Bigger thinking, looking at the larger issues around why comics face barriers, and trying larger scale projects to overcome these hurdles."
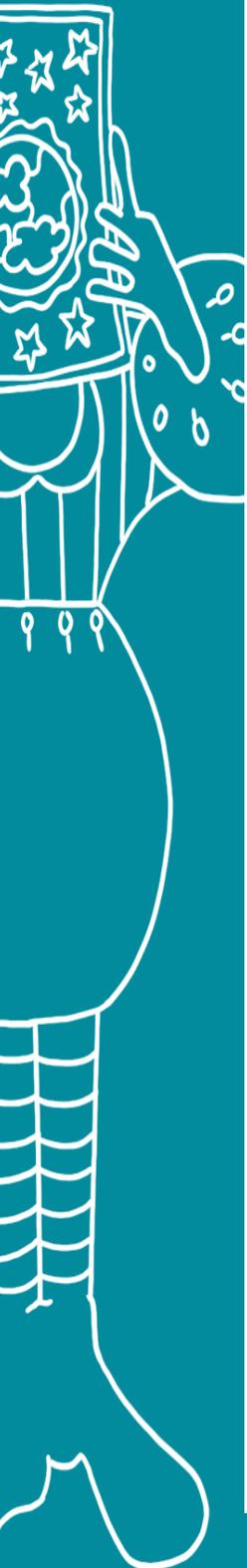
END NOTE & NEXT STEPS

Many issues, potential solutions and challenges have been listed above. As a small, nascent organisation, CCIC cannot, of course, concentrate on everything — but this conversation will help us identify the priorities of our community, set our direction and seek the funding to put initiatives in place.

Some of the areas where it is clear that CCIC can have a quick impact are:

- Signposting the comics networks, support and resources that already exist, so that they can be more easily discovered by both creators and those who would like to work with them.

- Promoting the concept that comics creators can self-organise, thus encouraging the creation of more change-making and activist groups, comics fairs, anthologies and localised support groups.

- Advocating the use of comics in contexts beyond the current norms: educating both comics creators and industries about the potential of comics as a way to convey information.

- Signalling the existence of grants for comics creators, including opportunities beyond arts-specific funding. Providing training on how best to secure such funding.

- "Get in people's faces by being of service, being used by the scientific community, factual, instructional. We are the great explainers — capitalise on this. We are vital and useful!"

- Providing resources to booksellers on a) published graphic novels and b) where to buy self-published and small press comics.

- Gathering the data to demonstrate the ROI of comics.

- Introducing resources that encourage best practice for accessibility to events and festivals. CCIC is committed to creating a culture of representation in which diversity, inclusion, and equality of opportunity are promoted proactively, and in which discrimination is not tolerated.

- Publishing resources on how to pay comics artists a fair rate.

Plans are now in progress to decide next steps and to create a framework that will allow implementation of these plans.

THEORY OF CHANGE

You said, We Did

We appreciate the time everyone has given to speak to us at the roundtable, online and in meetings. We are taking a considered approach to how we genuinely make a difference. This is a complex problem with some quick wins, but with some aspects that will take years to solve. We're in this for the long run.

Using the comic community feedback the team has been working on a Theory of Change. This is a tool that enables us to dive deep into the structures, barriers and processes that have led to this comics ecosystem. Working with the community we will use this roadmap to create work packages, access funding and build infrastructure. We seek to use data and research to do this work and will evaluate our outcomes. It's a long road ahead but we hope many of you will join us on this journey.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkpLmeVc5ck&t=2s

CONCLUSION

The ultimate aim of this consultation was to get a clearer picture of the current landscape in order to focus our efforts. The support and goodwill that CCIC has received from the community towards our work so far has been hugely galvanising. We are committed to improving the present situation in a way that will benefit this community and those working in parallel to it. As we so often say, "A rising tide lifts all boats".

There are also far wider implications of this work, since the comics medium is demonstrably the single most accessible and versatile form for sharing information and stories; educating on complex issues and fostering empathy and understanding. By raising the profile of comics, therefore, we will also be ensuring the plurality and democratisation of information, reaching a much wider audience; and by making comics viable as a career we will be uplifting innumerable voices, issues and ideas that benefit us all. As a result, the possibilities for social change are endless.

Thank you for reading!

The Comics Cultural Impact Collective
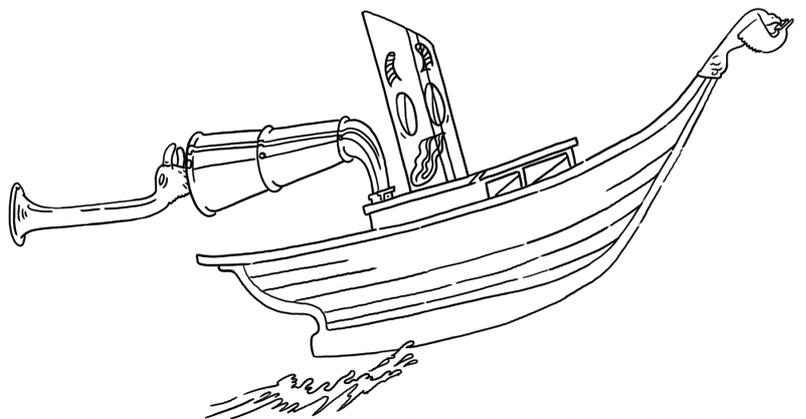
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all members of the comics community, creators, editors, publishers, comic-lover, booksellers, librarians, academics, festival organisers, teachers and more who attended this round table event and shared their ideas, experiences and wisdom.

Many thanks to those who gave up their time and expertise to help run the roundtable: Wallis Eates, Lana Lê, Kirsten Murray and Nicola Streeten.

Thank you to Rachel Krengel for your advice and experience. Many thanks to Nyla Ahmad for your invaluable contribution.

This report was written by Myfanwy Tristram, with input from the CCIC team.

CCIC are: Hannah Berry FRSL, Karrie Fransman, Rhiannon Griffiths MBE, Sara Kenney, Zara Slattery and Myfanwy Tristram.

FURTHER READING

Find links to much of the research cited, and more, at thecomicsculturalimpactcollective.org/The-Power-of-Comics.

Join us: subscribe to CCIC updates