

NEoN Evaluation 2021

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This report brings together anonymous opinions of NEoN from its audience, and puts those thoughts alongside recommendations for the future of the organisation. The report touches on the identity of the festival and what people understand it to do and to represent; it also brings to light misunderstandings people have about what NEoN is for. After identity, the evaluation looks at ways in which NEoN could shift its approach in order to better serve its users. And finally, we look at the hopes people have for what NEoN does next. Small changes are suggested alongside more thorough recommendations that would change the festival as we know it. None of these should be seen as prescriptive, but they should be understood as thoughtful suggestions from an invested audience who care about NEoN enough to spend the time filling in this survey.

The survey brought in answers from 23 people. In order to protect the identity of the person writing, some answers have been split into multiple parts or obfuscated. Other answers have been split into multiple parts in order to bring a stronger focus to the statement being provided.

IDENTITY

We felt it was important to include in the survey a question on how NEoN's identity is understood by its audience.

Speaking as two people outside the area who have only had the website to work back from in order to catch up on NEoN, it has been a little difficult to grasp exactly what NEoN does. That is partly due to the fact that NEoN covers a lot of bases. There are thematic programmes, international lineups, and a long archive of projects that span back years. We spent our time going through the website, reading the blog, and looking at the documentation of past programmes. But that took a long time.

Nothing was immediately obvious or solid. And that is fine -- not everything has to be immediate or succinct. But we hadn't come away with any elevator-quick pitch to describe it and we did wonder how other people understood NEoN, and if this vastness of the organisation risked misunderstanding.

Most importantly, we wanted to know if the image people have of NEoN matches up with what it wants to be known for. Because if not, then maybe there is work to be done on clearing that up.

Here is a selection of the answers we gathered. We have split them into different categories for better readability. Fortunately, most matched up with NEoN's own bio.

Question:

If you were to describe NEoN to somebody who didn't know anything about it, what would tell them? NEoN is...

Answers that matched NEoN's own bio:

A digital arts festival based in Dundee

An annual festival looking at digital art and technology

A digital arts festival, who showcase and work with people and organisations that use digital aspects to their creative practice

An eclectic mix of wondrous media art - digitally focused, from incredibly diy to intricately refined and complex!

An organisation from Dundee that brings international digital artists together to highlight important social and environmental issues through art and develop the digital arts community and work. Also gives opportunities to new/ young / minority group artists

North East of North is a progressive and inclusive global digital Arts festival based in Dundee. It is socially and politically aware and willing to ask questions whilst engaging its audience via performance and interactivity. NEoN celebrates digital arts by internationally known as well as and up and coming UK based digital artists and performers. They engage local educational establishments and have solid contacts with Art schools in Scotland, DCA and the V&A

Friendly quirky digital arts festival percolating through Dundee with autumnal warmth

A digital art festival in November with pop up events throughout the year. It is strange and wonderful and pushing back against the norms of art and what is expected when you visit a gallery.

Unclear answers:

The digital mind meeting awareness of consciousness

Unpredictable

Critical answers:

I honestly don't really know. It feels quite ephemeral and is one of the "new Dundee" events that seems to have nothing to offer the majority of the people who live there.

It feels like a small group of people indulging their own interests.

The fact that the name doesn't give a clue about what it is, and I would need to explain it... that's a good starting point.

A new media festival that belongs in the 1990s

Messy, problematic, harmful, dated

A festival with really great intentions but never seems to have the right people and resources to deliver (although it is a regularly funded org that seems to have no staff)

It's a little hard to understand exactly what NEoN do from posters and social so I think people might think that's not for them

EVALUATION ON IDENTITY

In general, the understanding of NEoN as a digital arts festival is there. Is there anything from these descriptions that NEoN feels is missing, or wants to be known for? It might be a lighter question to evaluate because it's doubtful people would fill the survey in if they didn't already know who NEoN was. People generally understand that it supports digital artists and underrepresented artists in particular, which is positive. But we can still reflect on this, and maybe reflect on what is missing - for example, only one person mentioned the November date, and nobody mentioned the team behind the work.

If we take a look at how NEoN presents itself, we can place these answers against them:

Website: 'NEoN Digital Arts (SCIO) aims to advance the understanding and accessibility of digital and technology-driven art forms and to encourage high quality within the production of this medium.'

Twitter: 'supporting digital and technology driven arts'

Instagram: 'NEoN aims to advance the understanding and accessibility of digital and technology-driven art forms'

The website's About section goes on for much longer than this. 'Technology-driven' appears in all three places new audiences are most likely to first encounter and learn about NEoN. For audiences that aren't necessarily art-inducted through higher education or class, this might come off as quite a convoluted phrase. The website's long About page in general is full of similar wording. The text makes it seem as though NEoN is speaking to itself and its inner-circle of people who are well read in this arena of culture, which might go a way to explaining why some of the critical answers were inputted: *'It's a little hard to understand exactly what NEoN do from posters and social so I think people might think that's not for them.'*

It might be useful for NEoN to rethink how it can present itself in a quick, accessible way for a larger audience. It can be a one line statement that heads everything. This doesn't

mean there cannot be a deep dive about NEoN on the website, but the sentiment could be there at the top, framed and clear. The rest could be waiting below for those who are invested in finding out more. The website should focus on communicating the purpose of NEoN, the outcomes of its work, and what makes it different from other arts organisations. What is the value in NEoN - why should people engage with its project? Why should they take time out of their day to pay attention to NEoN in some way? Maybe the organisation should aim to answer these questions.

It is also worth noting the website has no staff page which might make it unclear for those not in the know, especially over the pandemic, to figure out who is responsible for this work. A staff page is important for organisations to be more transparent. It is also a way for audiences to relate (or to find out they might not relate) to the demographics of the staff working behind the scenes.

Overall, the critical comments that came in through this question brought up problems that suggest NEoN struggles with being characterised as peripheral, outdated and irrelevant to the local community. There is a comment about NEoN's name also adding to this confusion. The criticisms brought up in this first section do carry through the rest of the report, where our evaluation looks at them in more detail.

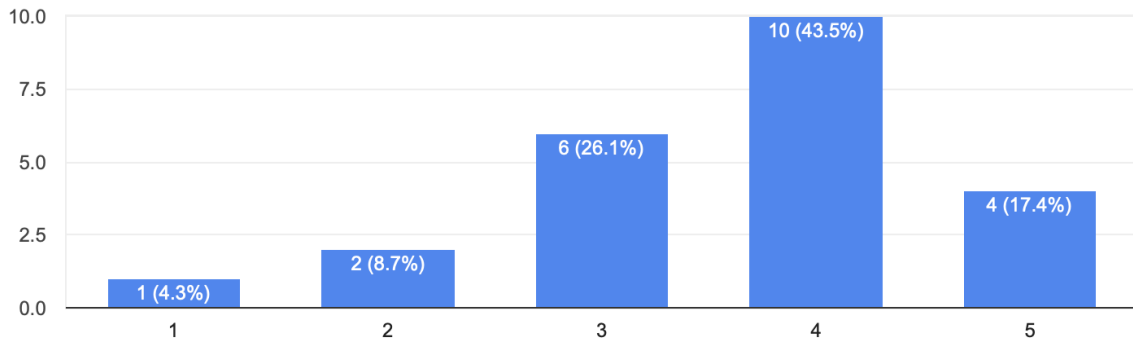
RATING NEON

While we are not fans of star ratings in general, we thought it would be a quick way to survey people's opinion of NEoN especially in a survey that is asking a lot of the person in terms of writing. Overall, most people placed in NEoN as being 4 out of 5, which is a positive takeaway from this report. The follow up question after the rating prompted people to then explain the number they had given. Listed below are the explanations, split between criticism and praise.

It is important for NEoN when reading this to decide whether NEoN wants to continue doing what it wants to do, or whether it wants to shift and adapt based on what other people think of it. We understand the criticism in this document as being supportive because it can be generative of new ideas and productive towards a new NEoN.

● How good do you think NEoN is? (5 being the best)

23 responses



Praise:

They are at the verging edge of contemporary virtual reality and authentic creation.

I think it's a mixed bag - that being one of the best parts.

Public engagement, reflecting local and global issues.

Longevity of this festival and the quality of the organisation, itinerary, workshops, events, seminars Performances and exhibitions.

I can imagine that NEoN will improve over time to have a stronger impact on the cultural consciousness around digital arts, perhaps featuring and elevating art works that subsequently become very well known.

Unique, life enhancing and gently vital.

Think it would be great to get it championed across Scotland and UK.

Some brilliant artists exhibit as part of NEoN.

Every time i've met new people and seen parts of Dundee I hadn't before. It feels like a way to make the art a part of the city rather than hide it away behind closed doors.

Quality of the artists they work with, their community engagement, a great team.

I particularly love the short film nights which always showcase films that drift into my mind for a long time after. I also enjoy the walk that happens each festival going around various pieces of art in the city.

it's great to have a radical festival like NEoN in our city.

love their combination of theoretical frameworks and hands on approach.

I think they're ok but I don't like their website. I've worked for them before tho on a commission and it was cool.

It brings new things to a city that needs new thinking.

Having been to a few of the festivals I always enjoyed how many different perspectives I could come across that I hadn't found elsewhere as well as opportunities for me to engage with the art in ways I haven't done before. I distinctly remember sitting in a sandbox filled with electronic artifacts digging around and thinking about all the electronic waste I must leave in my wake.

Criticism:

Still far from working classes

I haven't been attracted enough by anything in the programme, so can't score. Anything that has looked interesting is just layered in such obtuse language and turns me off straight away.

To me, NEoN is well meaning but a lot of it is not executed thoughtfully or well. Producing and commissioning work from diverse artists not out of genuine care but out of a need to feel like boxes should be ticked. I know firsthand that this has been a comment that has been made.

NEoN's output is good, but communication with the public isn't always clear (not obvious how people can get involved), and the newsletter is too infrequent.

The sharing and the showing and the taking people on the journey could be gentler / better - and I wish it was, as the projects that are programmed are really brilliant, and know that there is a lot of love and care that goes into the coordinating.

I find a lot of the NEoN content quite inaccessible, even as someone in the arts.

The programme is slapdash and frankly weird.

I believe they're only in receipt of RFO (like NPO) funding because they're based somewhere with few competing art orgs.

Neon have produced good work in the past but are unorganised and unwilling to change to be the more contemporary festival that it has the potential to be. I give it a 3 as NEoN has lots of positives but it feels like it's been stuck in the same place since its inception. Lots of work and a new direction is badly needed. New management and staff should be brought in to revive the festival.

Would be great to see link ups and ways in for those that are maybe not too sure what digital art / media art, to get involved.

The festival has shown lack of awareness for the in kind labour provided by partner orgs, has heavily relied on voluntary labour and very underpaid and overworked staff in the past - Local creatives and producers steer clear because of the known problems.

Could not pull off an online festival during the pandemic despite being a platform for digital arts.

I love seeing the stuff, but somehow it always feels a bit scary, unapproachable, and too arty for me. It feels a bit like it's mostly for people who already know lots about art, rather than those of us who'd like to learn more

Evaluation:

On the whole, our survey respondents have a positive view of NEoN and the work it does. A number of positive responses came from a local audience that have experienced the festival and programme in person and as part of the city (Dundee). People seem to hold a good impression of NEoN's public engagement, between local and global. There are multiple mentions of NEoN engaging with the city and the city being a key part of the festival and programme.

It could be worth identifying what has contributed to the positive feedback about NEoN's IRL programme and presence. What characterises the physical festival, what does being present in the city allow NEoN to do within the space of their programme?

There is ambiguity around NEoN's characterisation as niche. Respondents mentioned it in both praise and criticism. For some, NEoN is part of cutting edge, radical new thinking, leading conversation in an area of interest that is still developing. People believe in the program itself and the curatorial work has an audience that it is successful with. There is praise for programme and execution, a *'combination of theoretical frameworks and hands-on approach'*.

However, there is contrasting feedback that characterises NEoN's programme as inaccessible and unappealing because of *'obtuse language'*, even for an arts audience well accustomed to niche interest. NEoN is seen as intimidating and unapproachable because of its poor communication with the public. While the programme itself might be sound, there's an inability to effectively communicate with a public that might not hold prior knowledge of curatorial and programmatic themes.

Complex ideas and artistry can still be spoken about in plain language to help people find a way in. It's important for NEoN to do this work of introducing audiences to new ideas. People are unsure what NEoN's entry points for engagement are, there is no clear route to getting involved in the programme (as audience or participant), and no link or connection provided for those who don't know what digital art/media art is. NEoN is perceived as *'far from working classes'* because of this. This is disappointing for NEoN's audience, as NEoN has been identified as one of few arts organisations in the area. It's clear that NEoN has the potential to have a good deal of positive influence over the

regional cultural landscape, and its failings are characterised as a missed opportunity more than anything.

It's worth NEoN reflecting on whether these criticisms are primarily a result of being understaffed. There is no dedicated marketing or communications role within the organisation, and this could be creating communication problems that affect threshold perceptions from NEoN's audience, putting people off immediately by making NEoN's output seem opaque and impenetrable - like it's *'not for them'*. NEoN should also consider whether this gap in staffing could address previously mentioned criticisms too. Specifically the confusion around NEoN's identity and purpose, as this confusion seems to be affecting the communication of programme and engagement. There's specific mention of the newsletter being infrequent, this is the easiest recommendation to action regarding NEoN's communication, but there are several recommendations that need further examination and we would urge NEoN to not let that become the only change implemented.

There are also criticisms for NEoN's programme: it's been identified as slapdash, disorganised and outdated, *'well meaning but a lot of it is not executed thoughtfully or well'*. One response we think is important is that NEoN is bad at being an online festival: *'could not pull off an online festival during the pandemic despite being a platform for digital arts'*. This point is concurrent when read across most of the criticisms and praise in this section, as well as some of the issues raised in the last section. It could provide a context for the praise and criticism: that the points for improvement are related to a clunky existence online, where the IRL festival was well received. We would encourage NEoN to reflect on whether it is worth continuing with their online presence and activity in the same way, or at all.

If NEoN continues with its online programme, we elaborate on recommendations for a change of pace and a overhaul of output expectations and timeframe further down in this report. However, there is a particular criticism that the diversity of the programme feels token or performative; *'producing and commissioning work from diverse artists not out of genuine care but out of a need to feel like boxes should be ticked'*. Survey respondents have identified a recommendation themselves, in another criticism: that the sharing and showing of work could be improved by becoming gentler. It's clear that NEoN's strengths lie in the programme, it just needs to be executed with thought and care. It could be worth considering the addition of a producer to NEoN's core team, a role that would explicitly focus on the execution and delivery of programme, working between curator and communication team members. Further elaboration on our recommendations for staff and structural changes can be found further on in this report.

There is another specific point within the criticisms that we think NEoN needs to address urgently: that *'the festival has shown lack of awareness for the in kind labour provided by partner orgs, has heavily relied on voluntary labour and very underpaid and overworked staff in the past - Local creatives and producers steer clear because of the known problems'*. We aren't sure what to make of this, as it is potentially an inter organisational relationship issue that NEoN management needs to be able to identify and fix. Although the point is specific, against the backdrop of some of the other issues identified in this section, it could be said that NEoN has a problem at the level of governance and is relatively bad at working with people. Policy to institute care in interpersonal interactions, as well as between NEoN and its partners, would be both needed and welcome.

On the whole, there's a degree of lack of trust in NEoN's ability to correct course and make changes that enable them to better serve their audience. The perception that NEoN is stagnant and willing to update itself to become more relevant is a powerful one, and one that could be ultimately incredibly damaging. It speaks to the urgency of these changes, as well as the severity that people perceive this problem at.

While there is praise and positive feedback, we believe NEoN should take the criticisms and recommendations for improvement seriously. Particularly the recommendations for new management and staff to bring in new ideas, structure and direction. There's a criticism from the previous section that feels relevant here: that NEoN *'never seems to have the right people and resources to deliver (although it is a regularly funded org that seems to have no staff)'*. Staffing seems to be a sticking point that needs to be resolved, as it is complicating other deeper issues and affecting NEoN's ability to solve them.

We will elaborate on all of these recommendations further on in this report, but it's worth considering that these recommendations are based on issues that directly affect the way people feel overall about NEoN as an organisation.

Room for Improvement

Whilst the previous section also raises plenty of points that can be taken into consideration whilst NEoN is in a state of flux, the next question specifically asked the following:

Is there anything that annoys, disappoints or upsets you about NEoN that you wish would change? It could be something about their programming, personnel, website, social media etc.

The question is framed in a specific way for people to air any grievances they may have. These people might not have felt comfortable enough taking these criticisms to NEoN in person, or maybe they have not been invited to do so in any level way until now. Plenty of people in the arts especially take criticism as instantly meaning an attack, but everything that is said should be taken seriously. People took time to write these very useful and thoughtful comments, and they should be thanked for doing so.

The answers for this question are split into themed sections for clarity, and each has recommendations below it written by ourselves.

Communication:

Just the fact that it is so "other". The language used means it doesn't connect with anyone apart from people working in the field. Maybe it needs more input from people outside the usual team.

Not being an online digital festival but more a physical festival is tricky to communicate / understand.

Language used not very warm, feels like everything is online and not easy to access (perception not reality!)

Some publicity is very last-minute.

Social media is terrible.

I think it'd be an interesting experiment to run eg. programme copy through a readability checker - Hemingwayapp is my favourite. It might highlight how hard the stuff is to read - I'm a relatively intelligent person in a well-paid, senior job, but I struggle with it.

Please add alt-text to all images including on social media, and thread tweets when you make threads, so the parts of threads don't end up separated from each other.

Accessibility and readily experiential events for all

I wish I lived closer to Scotland, although some are accessible online. I really enjoyed watching screenings even in the lockdown. More publicity in Wales about NEoN perhaps via Arts establishments & education.

Recommendations:

When asked what could be improved from NEoN, many points were raised over communication, and in particular this referred to online communication across the website, social media and general publicity and copywriting.

We first raised this point in the initial Identity section, that some of the language used by NEoN to describe itself is not very accessible. This carries over to the way it talks about its events as well. For example, on the website at the moment there are event listings with descriptions of '*An interactive environment centred on the idea of data trust and data commons using the garden or seed bank as a metaphor.*' There is also, '*Spectral Constellations is a series of generative animations, driven by scientific data of young stars*' and '*Fannie Sosa is creating a new digital consciousness for the WIG.*' Sometimes it is language and other times it is unexplained references such as *the WIG*. These examples may sound plain to NEoN's staff reading them, but they are written in a way that does not feel inclusive. Copywriting should bear in mind as vast a public as possible, for whom events may be interesting and enjoyable, and it does not help to put up a hurdle like this again and again. It will alienate many potential audience members, or potentially confuse current ones.

As one survey-taker suggests, a readability checker could help keep NEoN's writing in check. Major institutions often aim to write gallery interpretation at a set reading level, and this might be a suggestion for NEoN to consider. Some organisations write in one way and then offer a Simple English version too; others include more definitions and explanations of technical language to help people follow along. Ideally, NEoN would have marketing staff that bear in mind accessibility and inclusivity without patronising audiences.

Ideally, NEoN's marketing staff would also liven up the social media channels and use them correctly (ie. the criticism about threading tweets properly). Social media is the first port of call for many audiences who want to enjoy the output of artistic organisations, and so it should be taken seriously. Platforms now offer so many in-app features that organisations should be making the most of: lives, highlights, discussions, and polls to name a few. The value of social media was underlined by the pandemic but it is something all arts organisations should put more effort into because they should not forget their disabled audience members who may not be able to come to in-person events at all.

On this point, all digital content put out by NEoN across their website, social media and mailing list should be made accessible to screen readers. Points about this accessibility are continued further below in the website section. But we gather there is a general feeling of disappointment and surprise that NEoN's digital output should be lacking in any way given the nature of NEoN's digital focus. NEoN does not seem to be using online spaces in a smooth, comfortable way, and its online presence is inconsistent. This cannot be helping when it comes to the identity of the organisation or the delivery of its programming.

Finally, a comment was made that communication about NEoN events is very last minute. Because of the fullness of the programme NEoN puts out, this is a surprise, unless the lateness of the marketing is due to events being fixed last minute too. More advance notice from curators could allow for more planning by any marketing staff, and it could generate lots of exciting content for audiences to look forward to. Looking over the social media channels of NEoN, this does not really happen in any significant way and it feels like a wasted opportunity for both organisation and audience.

Website-specific:

The website feels really inaccessible to me as a neurodivergent creative (ADHD) - huge walls of text, often inaccessible language. My brain automatically ticks it off as boring before I even attempt to engage with the content. I think (?) that it's designed this way to lessen the impact of digital footprints and be more environmentally conscious, and I totally admire that, but it just doesn't work for my brain.

Their website is a bit confusing and kinda ugly.

Website is a bit of a mess , always very last minute announcing things - v small social media presence - after some digging it seems like neon has re-orientated itself with better values and practices but still waiting to see actual actions on that commitment.

Recommendations:

Some of the website-specific comments carry on the criticism of an inaccessible online presence that is hard to understand or engage with. We have split the points on communication to underline the need to not only work on the voice NEoN uses to make it more legible, but to make that voice consistent across any channels where people might encounter NEoN's work. The website also carries a lot of text in large chunks that could be broken down or given better headings to make reading more digestible.

When we have checked the alt text for image descriptions on the website, the descriptions feel a little lazy. 'Image of a workshop' is not enough to describe somebody holding a piece of paper with illustrations that say 'a quest for a new internet' on it, and they don't enlighten us as to what the workshop is or what this specific page does. NEoN's website has the Userway accessibility tab which is great as it comes with many features but if it doesn't have things like good alt text at the ready, then it isn't going to be as fulfilling an experience as non-disabled visitors get to have to the site.

We did note that the separate festival website does not also come with Userway's accessibility panel, but we also wondered if there needed to be a separate website for the festival. From the outside, it seems as though NEoN risks drop offs from its own site to the festival site by separating them out -- but more than that, two separate sites with similar URLs could be adding to the confusion of audiences. Consolidating them might be a good idea.

Finally, a better visual brand for NEoN could be a way to not only bring together the separate websites and social media channels, but also make it easier to deliver information and ideas in a more appealing way. Something more modern than is in place at the moment could also help it become a more navigable site.

Programming:

More engaging online connections please.

It would be great to feel a little more of a presence from the festival throughout the year, even just in terms of sharing ideas and work that resonates - and not just to pop up

(though that may be just the way I experience the festival) and in conversations with making media art more present in Dundee year round.

I'd prefer more in-person events, but might not be possible until 2022?

Blog is weird, no direction in programming, they instrumentalise artists, and cause harm to artists.

Nothing they can change - but the timing of the festival always clashes with my teaching.

By nature of a festival, there is an intense focus on short festival every year. I'm not sure if it has work during rest of year.

Recommendations:

In the room for improvement section, a few people had trouble with the time-limited nature of NEoN's festival at the end of each year. This is a difficult one to examine because a short festival time is simply the nature of NEoN, but it is also a positive point because it indicates people want content more often outside of that time. This feeling of wanting more content more steadily throughout the year might be a result of consecutive lockdowns, people staying at home, and people newly working from home. The feeling of time passing has changed for many, and so they may want more culture to engage with.

As with many aspects of the pandemic, points around disability, accommodation and accessibility can be taken into consideration here with the festival format too. If each festival lasts a few days, and somebody is ill for those days, do they have to hope next year they will be up for it? This year's festival is online, but it still isn't on for very long, even after extending online festival access to 21st November. These are also questions to reflect on NEoN's past festivals and also how it works going forward, making sure to record anything that is live, and archive everything so that people can get to the work in their own time. It also underlines the importance of creating high quality online content that is also delivered in a quality way because there are plenty of people who will only ever engage with NEoN from afar -- and that may be due to sickness, disability, work, other responsibilities, or simply because of their location in the world.

As for the timeframe, slowing everything down and releasing work at a gentler pace could also go a small way to addressing the issues raised elsewhere of artists feeling instrumentalised. But ultimately, if anybody is identifying those problems with the

organisation's attempts at diversity, the problem is severe and much more work needs to be done to rectify that (if the work can be done at all).

Diversity:

I feel like decisions are made not out of belief that it's the right thing but out of belief that it should be done to please audience/funders.

I have always thought the diversity of artists at neon is brilliant and so much better than the events i attend but i think it is always an ongoing process and I would love to see even more representation of artists from different background, especially indigenous artists, artists with disabilities and non gender conforming artists

NEoN is not quite at the forefront when it comes to publicly visible commitments to diversity and inclusion, though it is far ahead of many much larger arts institutions. I would like to see NEoNs messaging around social issues and marginalised identities do more to centre the most marginalised, challenge power, and critique assumptions.

Recommendations:

The general recommendation is for NEoN to expand their definition of diversity and what it means and includes. However, we're unsure about the extent to which that acts as a solution without addressing the underlying problems of artists feeling tokenised or instrumentalised.

Other arts organisations bring in diverse 'curators in residence' as a quick fix, and this might be something NEoN tries as well, but it would be patching over a problem instead of fundamentally changing approach to address the underlying issue. We believe the recommendations for diversity are linked to the previous point about programming, slowing down and working at a gentler pace where work is handled more thoughtfully and carefully. If artists are treated with care and consideration, if gaps in staffing are filled to make NEoN more robustly capable at delivering diverse output, then a lot of the wider issues affecting NEoN's diversity problems would be halfway towards being resolved.

Artistic:

The festival should do more to reflect digital art now, actually supporting young and diverse people who can lead the festival in a better direction.

That sometimes it feels a little inaccessible - as someone who knows the festival and loves the work and the idea of what work can be encompassed in the festival - that it can sometimes feel defensive in its presentation, rather than passionate about inviting new minds in to experience it all.

Recommendations:

There was a strong comment made in the very first section of this report on Identity, stating that the person filling in the survey saw NEoN as 'a new media festival that belongs in the 1990s.' Although it might seem obvious or the easy quick fix, we would like to avoid recommending bringing younger, emerging artists to make work within the same festival format that is proving problematic.

This would potentially be an opportunity for NEoN to try a new form of collaboration with artists and makers. Rather than just getting artists to come in and work under the guidance and care of one curator, under the streamlined umbrella of one programming strand, maybe there could be room for more itinerant projects? We would recommend NEoN investigate more experimental potential ways of working. This could start with the recommendations from earlier sections: to slow down, expand NEoN's understanding of diversity, increase NEoN's staff and internal capacity, cede control of projects to a more diverse range of artists and makers, implement more horizontal internal structures so new staff have creative control and the ability to collaborate meaningfully. This can all only be done once NEoN addresses its internal governance issues, especially those regarding care policies and directorial responsibility (please refer to the next section on employment for further detail). We believe that once those issues are addressed, more interesting and relevant programming will simply emerge as a result. There's no magic wand or quick trick; good programming comes from good governance and a team that feels enabled and supported to produce good work.

Employment:

While working there, and getting paid £10 an hour for 2 days a week I essentially managed the festival as the festival director was away on personal leave on the two weeks of the festival 2019. I managed staff crying and having breakdowns about the amount of stress they were under, staff that were getting paid more than me. No issue with taking personal leave but the lack of guidance or appropriate pay given while that happened was shocking.

I was invited to submit a proposal to them a few years ago, did so even though it wasn't a good fit, never heard back and only learned it hadn't been accepted on announcement of the programme. Their conduct is unprofessional.

As a former staff member I felt like when I worked there I was given all of the responsibility but none of the rights. I couldn't change anything even though I had plenty of ideas.

When leaving my job at the festival I advised that new people should be hired through actual job postings, instead of networks. One member of staff, who ended up severely impacting a new member of staff's mental health to the point of quitting, should not have been employed given the way they treated other employees. I felt like the director kept them employed as they felt sympathy towards them, even though they knew how many problems they caused.

There are no early career voices on the team - very rarely support local creative practitioners - heard some horror stories about working there.

There is so much work going on behind the scenes to make all the events happen but I feel like although the artists themselves are always credited, the neon staff are not always visible outside of volunteers present at exhibits.

Recommendations:

Out of all the recommendations, we believe that the recommendations regarding employment are the ones that should be addressed first and foremost. It would be incredibly difficult, near impossible for NEoN to implement any of the necessary changes mentioned in this report, without sincerely addressing the severe problems raised by these comments.

The Director should be present for the festival, physically or remotely, they should be able to lead activity, maintain oversight and be prepared to assume responsibility when things go wrong or when plans change. Responsibility within NEoN needs to be

proportionate to pay. If someone isn't being paid enough to do something, they shouldn't be asked (or expected, or left to get on with) that thing. Implication is equally as important as directly asking, and leaving jobs that require responsibility to staff on living wage is not good practice or considerate for employees wellbeing.

We would recommend that NEoN stop using volunteers and unpaid labour. If work is worth doing, it is worth paying for, and this practice only contributes to the class exclusivity and social cleansing of the arts. NEoN needs to provide acknowledgement of applications, as well as feedback and a proper response when declining applications.

Since previous sections raised the wider point about NEoN being understaffed, we would recommend adding an external HR department. But most seriously, if complaints are being raised about staff members, the director's personal feelings shouldn't be affecting the way they are treated or disciplined, and they certainly shouldn't allow them to continue adversely impacting the wellbeing and workplace experience of other staff members. Externalising that process is better for fairness, transparency and everyone's wellbeing. It would also potentially be better for NEoN as an organisation.

Solving these problems that affect employees wellbeing will have a positive effect on retention rates for younger/entry level staff. It will also enable and support the NEoN team to produce a higher quality of work, as interpersonal problems will have a route towards resolution. Hopefully with a better and safer working environment, collaboration will become easier too.

On the whole, we believe that NEoN has a structural problem when it comes to staffing. NEoN is incredibly bottom heavy and largely run by people who are not paid well enough to compensate for the work they're being asked to do. As a result, these people are under an enormous amount of stress that they are not supported with dealing with, by the managerial team, by pay or (to be completely honest) by their own ability and experience. Several positions need to be filled to take this disproportionate burden of pressure off minimum wage staff, so they can actually do their jobs. We would recommend these roles being created and filled: a curatorial lead, a full time assistant producer or curator, a marketing/publicity/social media co-ordinator, an events co-ordinator. Hiring dedicated staff for these roles will enable these jobs to be done in a more dedicated and thoughtful way, and improve the overall quality of the work that NEoN has the capacity to produce. An external HR department would allow for less biased oversight of the core team, and better management practice from the top down will facilitate better interpersonal relationships between the NEoN team and artists/makers. This should be where the changes start. NEoN should examine how

these structural problems came about in the first place and take appropriate steps to ensure that they are not repeated.

What next?

Majority of this report has focused on what NEoN is currently doing, and what NEoN has done. We have made recommendations based on this past and present work. This section of the report is concerned with where NEoN should go. Once the recommendations made so far have been implemented and changes have been made, what should NEoN consider next and what long term vision should the organisation have?

Our question specifically asked:

What would you like NEoN to do next? Are there any particular creatives you would like to see them work with, any topics you would like to see covered? Or is there something missing that you think they could provide?

It could be an easy fix to take these suggestions as material for NEoN's programme and leave the structural suggestions to the side. However, it is important for NEoN to take this feedback about what's missing on board and address issues holistically, maintaining a vision of what's already successful and what needs to change. It is not worth slotting additional changes into a problematic structure.

Overall festival direction:

I hate to say this because it sounds pretty brutal, but take its head out of its own backside and try to connect with a wider audience - in programming and communication. I honestly feel terrible saying all this, but I feel it's a missed opportunity for the city.

Try new things!!! People involved for a long time should let go of power to a role that fits process, finance, grant application etc.

Start again or stop... maybe it's run it's course. Get rid of the white American men. Change structure, wired committee, board thing. Get some direction. Pay artists properly. Treat artists work with respect.

i think more written content about digital art & related things (after they better the website please) like more critical reviews of shows, interview with artists etc. more engagement with contemporary digital culture. more opportunities for artists.

Maybe they should have a long hard think about whether the interface of art and technology is actually a) interesting or b) a good thing to be celebrating in 2021

Programming:

Would love to see them work more with other spaces in the city, integrating and embedding a programme with some more partnerships - without compromising the NEoN identity. Wondering if this could be more about the NE - from the name - widening a network along the coast, and with spaces and creatives from this part of Scotland. Balanced with linking up to make more happen online, with the digital focus too. Last years link up with Sisters With Transistors and the voices behind the film was great, to see the global connections - even when we couldn't all be in the same city. More of that!

Do less things but do it well (actually think this is happening more now)

Real world adventures

As soon as we are no longer Covid compromised I'd like to see more physical work in real space rather than online again - the wonderful community NEoN created during it's festival is lost when mostly online!

More online offering as I am no longer in Dundee

More about disability and more about transness?

an interactive art work where all punk, vegan, queer women can unite and create a ceremony for true change

more 'guerilla tactic' art in public places, where it's not expected

I would like to see neon question the role of digital arts in the climate emergency and how there are so many technologies being exploited and generating emissions in ways most people dont understand myself included

Operations:

Get a new committee to curate and program the festival, focusing on young and diverse curators, artists and producers. Also make sure to involve creatives that represent Dundee and the future of Dundee. This is not a fancy London arts fest.

Work on better support for staff members, volunteers etc. Focus spending on people.

Really love that aspects like this - and transparent reporting / reviewing is happening, and the sharing of that process - just assessing our digital lives etc. and pushing that digital creativity is, linking up with advocacy and other areas of research that are maybe so apparent.

Tbh I'm a bit disappointed that neon are outsourcing this work to TWP - always relying on other parties to do the work - neon have never been open to criticism or advice from the community

that is actively engaging with the programme, I wonder how much of info gathered in this survey do will actually be heard by neon.

Communication:

Share what differences artists and festival is making

I checked back at neon website and was interested in wording that it is about accessibility of technologically driven art. This sounds really great with emphasis on accessibility- could be good to really emphasise this in programming - eg action around digital poverty

Be less opaque, because I'm sure I'm missing out on some great stuff. Thanks!

Evaluation:

The suggestions from this question are all generally in keeping with the thoughts outlined throughout the report so far.

There is mention of connecting *'with a wider audience - in programming and communication'*. This a recommendation that spans from audience to *'other spaces in the city'*. The proposal of a more collaborative approach between NEoN and its partner organisations could provide the broader outlook that so many of the responses have specifically mentioned. It could hold exciting potential both for NEoN as an organisation and for the wider regional landscape NEoN sits within. A collaborative approach to programming could also allow NEoN's activity to slow down and become more thoughtful and careful, without actually it feeling like NEoN's programme has dramatically shrunk.

There is a request for *'more physical work in real space'*, with emphasis on the *'wonderful community NEoN created'* in that IRL festival format. This is contrasted by a request to provide more online content, as established audience members are no longer in Dundee. While at first this might seem contradictory, it's worth NEoN considering how it could be possible to do both at the same time. If NEoN were to consider the online programme as a supplement to the IRL programme, or as a space to document or archive the IRL programme, it could resolve both of these suggestions, as well as the call to make the programme more generally accessible. Ultimately it's for NEoN to decide what resolution fits best, but the demand for overhaul would be met by readjusting the relationship between physical and digital festival activity.

There are also specific recommendations to *'start again or stop'*, *'change structure'*, for *'people involved for a long time should let go of power to a role that fits process'*. While stopping altogether may not be a course that NEoN chooses to take, it could be worth considering as a recommendation for the overhaul of governance and structure. It could be worth NEoN considering a move towards a more horizontal model, where decisions were made by the organisation collaboratively and responsibility was shared evenly across the team. There's a

recommendation to *'get a new committee to curate and program the festival'*, which would certainly provide the collaborative approach to programming mentioned above.

It is worth reiterating the suggestion to provide better support for staff, specifically volunteers. In this report we have recommended abandoning the use of volunteers and unpaid labour. We would suggest that paying volunteers living wage as a minimum effort would be a good starting place from which to begin providing better support. That is by no means the full extent of the support NEoN could provide, but further recommendations about employment have been made previously in this report.

There is also specific mention that the transparency of this process is a welcome signal in a new direction; another response asks NEoN to *'be less opaque'*. NEoN could reflect on what it can do to become more transparent in process, policy and structure. Could NEoN publish their accounts? Could there be a policy document that's made public, so NEoN's audience are well aware of how it is governed and structured? Could NEoN open itself up to criticism and community input in a more consistent way by assembling a local advisory board to help steer its direction and overview? Or maybe a section of the website could allow NEoN's audience to submit anonymous feedback?

Finally there is the recommendation to take these suggestions seriously; *'NEoN have never been open to criticism or advice from the community that is actively engaging with the programme, I wonder how much of the info gathered in this survey will actually be heard'*. More than anything, this suggestion underlines the urgency behind the need for changes. It is clear that NEoN plays a significant role in its regional arts landscape and is surrounded by a community of actively engaged practitioners that want to see it contribute meaningfully to that landscape. It's implied that criticisms and advice have been offered before; we would advise NEoN to seriously reflect on whether any of the suggestions made in this report have been made before, or if there have been suggestions made in the past that we haven't mentioned, but that NEoN could now consider afresh alongside this report.

Summary

We'll conclude by summarising the main recommendations as suggested actions.

Communication:

The first set of recommendations are regarding an overhaul of how NEoN communicates with its audience and the wider public.

- A dedicated communications lead would improve the perception and understanding of public-facing elements as well as NEoN's core programme.
- Use of plain language for event and programme copy so it is accessible for a wider public that might not have prior knowledge of the concepts NEoN engages with.
- A readability checker would be helpful to keep NEoN's writing on track.
- If a new or unusual/abstract term is being used, make sure it is explained. (Eg: abbreviations are explained in brackets, references are linked, definitions of academic terminology are provided).

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We would also recommend a general plan for marketing and communications development.

- Developing an in-house tone of voice that feels approachable, accessible and consistent across website and event copy.
- Copywriting should bear in mind as vast a public as possible This is a tricky thing to achieve without the required skillset or experience. NEoN should consider the potential benefit of adding a professional copywriter to their core team to work alongside the communications lead.
- A thorough audit of NEoN's website, specifically examining the general user experience of navigating through it to find key information, identifying what's missing, and overhauling the NEoN about section so there's better communication of NEoN's purpose and presentation to that public.
- A thorough and planned schedule for programme and events in advance, so they can be properly marketed without feeling rushed or last minute.
- Social media features should be used properly (eg: threading tweets)
- Development of a strategy for social media, so that NEoN is able to take full advantage of the outreach and public engagement opportunities that these digital spaces present.
- Beyond outreach and engagement, social media is also hugely important for NEoN's disabled audience members who may not be able to come to in-person events at all. The accessibility potential should be included in the plans for social media strategy.

It might be helpful to start by workshopping through NEoN's purpose and value, the outcomes of its work, what it specifically does that makes it different from other arts organisations, and how to translate that all into a communicable format.

Website:

There were also specific recommendations to improve the accessibility of NEoN's website.

- All digital content put out by NEoN across their website, social media and mailing list should be made accessible to screen readers.
- Break down large chunks of text into readable and digestible chunks, consider better headings to organise information.
- Alt text for image descriptions is not thorough or thoughtful enough, and needs to be consciously factored into plans for website overhaul as well as the social media development plans.
- NEoN should consider whether there's a need for a separate website for the festival, as it could cause confusion. Consolidating the two websites would also make consistency easier and reduce the potential for a drop off in users.
- A better visual identity could be a way to bring together separate websites and social media channels, make it easier to deliver information and ideas, and make the site more navigable and appealing.

Programme:

The third set of recommendations relates to programme and the wider structure and timeframe that activity takes place across.

- IRL programme is well regarded because it takes place across the city of Dundee and engages meaningfully with site and space. NEoN should examine what specifically they have done with the IRL programme in the past that has made it all land so successfully.
- NEoN's online programme has been characterised as disorganised, rushed and unappealing because of obtuse language. While some of those issues can be resolved by fixing the staffing gaps and the communication problems mentioned in other recommendations below, there are wider issues that need to be addressed alongside this.
- Set clear and concise entry points for audience and participants. Make these engaging and identifiable in website copy that communicates the purpose and value of attendance/participation.
- Make sure event formats are simple and user friendly. For example, if an experimental format is being used for a workshop, explain the format and reasoning for using it in clear and simple terms in the event copy.
- NEoN should consider the way their audience might perceive entry points from a threshold, and adapt the description and format accordingly.
- NEoN should consider a more collaborative approach to producing work, making connections and links with partner organisations in the region and beyond.

There was a specific recommendation to slow down and make the programme's pace and presentation gentler. The programme delivery at the moment was characterised as rushed, not thoughtfully or carefully executed, so its quality suffers.

- We recommended slowing down and taking time, stretching online activity out so events and programme have more time to be properly advertised.
- Slowing pace down will also contribute to a solution for the problem of token diversity and artists feeling instrumentalised. By working on longer term basis, the relationship

between artist and curator/producer will hopefully become less strained, NEoN's team will be able to be more responsive to artists needs, and have a better capacity to facilitate and support them in their work.

- It might be worthwhile for NEoN to examine the number of artists they work with, assessing whether this approach of a slower pace with a longer time frame could also involve being more selective with commissions. A slower programme could focus funding on a smaller group of artists that are facilitated and supported towards producing better and more thoughtful work.

After all of the above, there's the recommendation to readdress the relationship between the IRL and online programme.

- NEoN should seriously consider whether it is worthwhile continuing with its separate online programme as is.
- It could be a better assurance of quality output to focus on an IRL festival that is documented online, or that takes place IRL and online in tandem. The online programme could be readjusted and focussed as a supplement to the IRL programme.

Employment & Structure:

The final set of recommendations refer to employment, the structural problems of NEoN's shape and upper management makeup:

- Being understaffed has led to further complications that are entirely avoidable, and that could be prevented with better policy/governance and dedicated roles to provide structure and oversight.
- We would recommend adding these roles to the core NEoN team: a curatorial lead, a full time assistant producer or curator, a marketing/publicity/social media co-ordinator, an events co-ordinator.

NEoN has repeatedly been characterised as bad at working with people. Although this could be related to understaffing and lack of capacity, there is also a need for policy to institute care in interpersonal interactions, as well as between NEoN and its partners.

- NEoN needs to expand its definition of diversity, what it means and includes. This is not a finite task, as it also involves addressing the underlying problems of artists feeling instrumentalised within the programme. We're including this in this section of the recommendations because an expanded definition of diversity should be part of internal considerations, as well as the more externally visible programming considerations.
- Responsibility within NEoN needs to be proportionate to pay and minimum wage staff shouldn't be left to manage the festival in the director's absence.
- Provide proper acknowledgement of applications, as well as a notification of an application's status and feedback for unsuccessful applications.
- Most importantly, we recommend the addition of an external HR department. NEoN has historically failed to adequately arbitrate in moments of interpersonal conflict, and by doing so has jeopardised the well-being and workplace experience of staff members.

NEoN could reflect on what it can do to become more transparent in process, policy and structure.

- NEoN could publish its accounts/organisational budgets, so financial decisions are transparent.
- NEoN could implement the use of a standard rate card to use when working with freelancers.
- Once policy has been settled and written, a policy document could be made public, so NEoN's audience are well aware of how it is governed and structured.
- NEoN could open itself up to criticism and community input in a more consistent way by assembling a local advisory board to help steer its direction and provide oversight. This should be a paid role.
- NEoN should consider adding a section to the website that would allow NEoN's audience to submit anonymous feedback on a continuous basis. NEoN should implement a structure that allows it to take this feedback on board when making decisions and putting together programme.

All of these recommendations are part of the wider need for NEoN to readjust its very structure. We also made recommendations for a new organisational shape that could make all the previous recommendations more impactful:

- It could be worth NEoN considering a move towards a more horizontal model, where decisions are made by the organisation collaboratively and responsibility is shared evenly across the team.
- NEoN should consider committee-based decision making models to get started with a new collaborative approach. It would be worth looking into existing models that work for others, and finding examples of this in practice to learn from.
- If horizontal internal structures could be beneficial, we recommend NEoN look at making pay more horizontal by paying its core team the same salary, or paying all staff the same day rate or hourly wage (using either the living wage, or a calculated average based on budget available for salary).
- Stop using volunteers and unpaid labour. Pay all staff the living wage, as a minimum.

The above recommendations are all important steps towards rebuilding trust with local creatives and producers who have little faith in NEoN's ability to perform its organisational duty of care and due diligence.

Conclusion:

NEoN is clearly a festival with an invested audience that does highly regarded work in its home city of Dundee. Both we and our survey respondents have identified improvements that are needed across a wide range of areas. However none of these are insurmountable problems. They are all achievable recommendations that would greatly improve NEoN's capacity to produce even better work for a wider range of people and contribute more meaningfully to the regional arts landscape it is a part of. We hope these recommendations have been helpful and,

at the very least, given NEoN a starting point from which to consider how it wants to approach its future direction and strategy.