

The Arts in Cumbria:

'Calling from the Past and Showing the Future'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cumbria's rich cultural history is facing unprecedented pressure, compounded by huge reductions in UK arts funding since 2010. Having experienced these pressures first-hand since 2017, WordForWord Arts CIC launched a county-wide survey in 2026 to investigate how creatives, performers and audiences see the present and future state of regional arts and culture.

The findings revealed that while Cumbria boasts "pockets of greatness" of community arts work and vibrant local talent, these initiatives and projects remain disconnected and financially challenged. The survey found that the primary barriers facing both audiences and creators are economic; namely, reductions in funding, increasing costs, limits in accessibility, unreliable transport and insufficient marketing resulting in difficulties reaching new audiences.

To improve the future prospects of Cumbrian arts and culture, we must make a shift towards long-term, more commercially stable solutions; for example, repurposing disused high-street retail units into creative spaces - such as Clevedon's Theatre Shop - has the potential to increase visibility, support high-street footfall and provide revenue for the arts.

Ultimately, investing in Cumbria's arts and culture sector shows direct links with health, wellbeing and happiness, as well as reduced strain on local public services. By considering how funding and spaces are utilised, we can create a more resilient, sustainable creative industry that benefits everyone across the county.

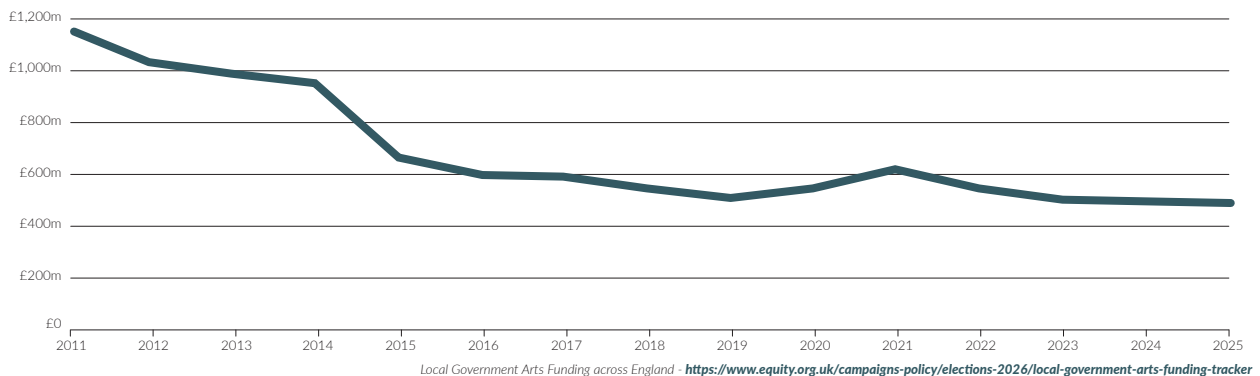
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INTRODUCTION

Cumbria has a long history of leading arts and culture within the United Kingdom, from William Wordsworth's poetry, to the architecture of Sara Losh, and the legendary comedy of Stan Laurel.

However, Equity's recent research shows a 55% reduction in arts funding across the UK since 2010, most notably in England¹. WordForWord Arts has been involved in creative projects in Cumbria since 2017 with lived experience of the increasing struggles to make arts projects happen and make them accessible to the public.

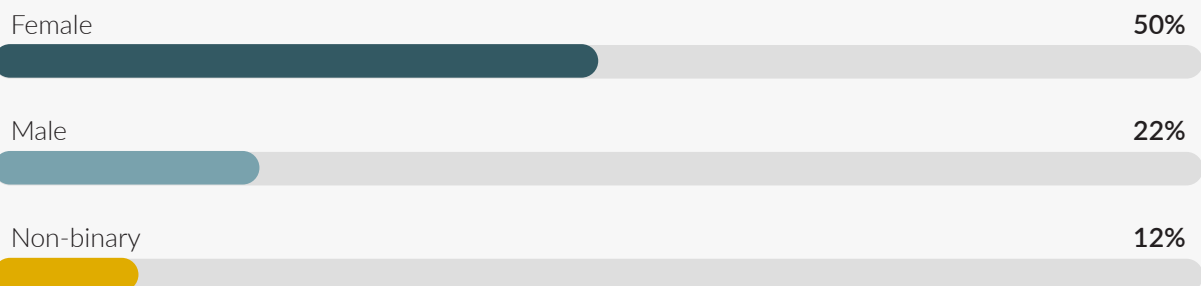


We wanted to find out how these experiences reflected (or contradicted) the experiences of others in Cumbria – creatives, audience members, and those with artistic aspirations.

We decided to invite a broad spectrum of individuals to share their opinions and ideas about what works in Cumbria's arts and culture industry, what the challenges are, and what we can strive for in the future. We attempted this by creating an online survey and shared it through online platforms, and through Cumbrian arts and culture networks and organisations.

So, who responded? We had responses from people who work within education, as performers, and as event organisers, but the most common group to complete the survey were audience members. The vast majority were aged 65+, with a fairly equal number of responses from 25-34 year olds, 45-54 year olds, and 55-64 year olds. Younger age groups were in noticeably smaller numbers². Out of those who chose to share their gender, 50% of respondents identified themselves as female, with 22% identifying as male and 12% as non-binary³.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY GENDER



Those who responded had varied levels of prior experiences in the arts, including:

Running arts programs in local schools

Community Arts Workers

Freelance Artists and Designers

Drama Teachers and Tutors

Writers and Poets

Performers and Musicians

Art Historians and Curators

Regular Audience Members at Theatre Events and Music Gigs

Frequent Visitors, Volunteers and Supporters of Cumbrian Galleries and Arts Venues

WHAT ARE THE POSITIVES?

In our survey we asked what made a positive arts experience that could be exemplified for future projects and for prioritising funding. Respondents highlighted several areas including:



Accessibility and inclusivity included the choice of venue and the general organisation of events, including consideration of ticket/entry costs and disability needs so a broader audience could experience creative opportunities. Adapting how events are organised surrounding local weather challenges and transport limitations were mentioned repeatedly, and a focus on using local talent and engaging with communities.

Respondents also voiced that the treatment of local artists was important, including fair pay and their authentic creative voice being enabled.

We didn't want to focus on the negatives and the problems in Cumbria. We wanted to celebrate the great work being done and spread the word through this paper. So, respondents were asked to highlight events, venues and organisations where they have experienced enjoyable arts events. Respondents mentioned a broad range of examples, including:

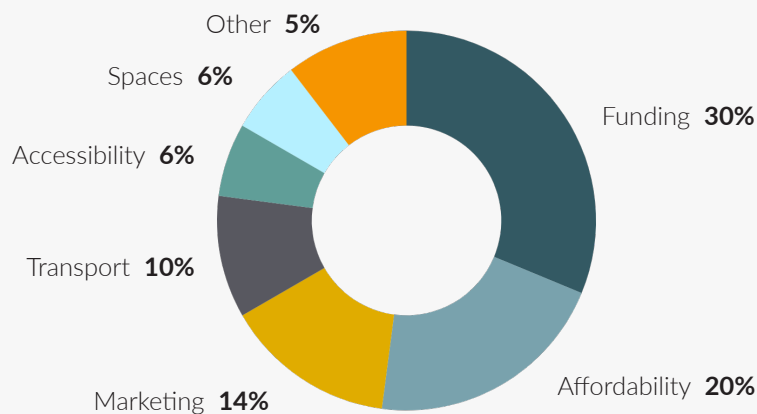
- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 🗨 Blue Jam Arts | 🗨 Kirkgate Arts |
| 🗨 Signal Film and Media | 🗨 Keswick Film Club |
| 🗨 Words by the Water | 🗨 The Centre |
| 🗨 The Carnegie Theatre and Arts Centre | 🗨 Caldew Press |
| 🗨 Tullie | 🗨 Together We Can Create |
| 🗨 The Old Fire Station | 🗨 Queer Cumbria |
| 🗨 The Settlement | 🗨 Art Gene |
| 🗨 Shipping Brow Gallery | 🗨 Carlisle Writers' Group |
| 🗨 The Source | 🗨 The Brewery Arts Centre |
| 🗨 Theatre by the Lake | 🗨 Lakeland Arts |
| 🗨 Soundwave | 🗨 The Emporium |
| 🗨 Upfront Arts Venue | |

However, some of these suggestions did mention that affordability and transport were likely challenges for the wider Cumbrian public. There was also a small number of hesitant responses that felt "let down" by arts companies who had made initial contact with communities, but this hadn't been sustained or fully realised. There was an overall message that there are "pockets" of excellent arts opportunities in Cumbria, but they are disconnected and struggle to market themselves effectively across the county.

THE BARRIERS TO ARTS ACCESS

To strengthen and enable the arts and culture in Cumbria, it's important that we understand where the barriers and challenges lie. We asked what people felt these were based on their experiences and perceived attitudes in the local area.

RESPONDENTS BY PERCEIVED MAIN BARRIER TO ARTS ACCESS



The primary barrier was funding, followed by affordability. These two issues impact one another as the economic pressures on arts venues and companies increase the cost to the public and reduces the potential audience for events. It also reduces the ability to commission local artists to create original work.

Marketing was highlighted as a key factor in arts engagement as respondents felt that coverage of creative events was often after they had taken place, or without enough notice to logistically plan transport and childcare to attend/take part. Smaller venues and companies struggle to market themselves due to costs, and online platforms prove to be unreliable and inconsistent in their effectiveness. Reaching audiences (notably new audiences) is often difficult as people are less likely to leave the house than previously⁴.

Access to spaces was also highlighted, showing that there are limited affordable and fully accessible arts venues. Existing venues struggle with increasing overhead costs and reduced income, finding grant systems difficult to navigate. Transport routes across the county, especially for those living in more rural areas or for venues/events in rural areas, were characterised as infrequent and unreliable.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

When summarising the challenges identified through the survey responses, the key areas that need to be addressed are all economic – funding for creatives/companies, affordability for audiences, and reaching audiences through effective marketing. These challenges can be addressed through sustainable investment with commercial models providing varied revenue streams for companies and venues. The use of empty retail spaces within local high streets would increase visibility and awareness of the arts and culture in the area, while benefitting other local businesses. When marketing is becoming increasingly difficult, costly, and dependent on social media algorithms, visibility could be a key solution to promotional challenges.

CASE STUDY

Theatre Shop, Clevedon (Est. 2015)

A case study showing the viability of this would be the Theatre Shop in Clevedon, founded in 2015. Theatre Shop is based within a disused shop unit in the centre of Clevedon that showcases original touring and local events/performances while producing profitable, family-friendly events at Christmas. The Theatre Shop has also adapted to needing new premises, moving to a new unused space in the local market hall.

Clevedon has many similarities to areas within Cumbria, containing a marine lake, a poet's walk, and an independent cinema dating back to 1912. The opportunities for tourism are parallel to those in Cumbria but on a smaller scale, meaning Cumbria has more to offer with more varied history and culture.

The major difference is investment and enablement to use commercial spaces. Attempts have been made to use retail spaces for arts and culture ventures, but the same barrier has led to these being short term – the funding simply ran out. While local charities continue to support the arts through smaller grants, overall funding into the arts by larger funding bodies has decreased⁵. The anxiety of finding the next grant award is the reality for many arts companies, venues and freelance artists⁶, making arts and culture a precarious vocation. Several respondents commented on the lack of incentives for young, emerging creatives in the area to stay in Cumbria. Acknowledging the positive economic impact of funding the arts⁷ and enabling it through long-term investment and reducing the cost of using high street spaces will increase the feasibility of a career in the arts. The impact on health and wellbeing in the arts also needs to be recognised by those with extensive available budgets to distribute, as this will lower the need for local social services and decrease anti-social behaviour⁸.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

As the public use of online shops increases and high streets continue to struggle, the offer of something creative, inspiring, and engaging can give the arts its unique selling point. The offer of an experience that cannot be bought online or binged at home is clearly needed and wanted by our community. The rising costs of social services in England are leading to less funding for the arts⁹, while the arts are arguably a key factor in lowering these costs. Through this white paper we hope to promote this perspective and alter how funding is distributed to benefit everyone in Cumbria.

WHO IS WORDFORWORD ARTS CIC?

WordForWord Arts began in 2017 with a clear purpose. We wanted to bring the specific power of verbatim theatre to Carlisle and Cumbria. As a not-for-profit company, we focus entirely on highlighting the undertold stories of our region. We believe the most compelling drama comes directly from real life.

We are dedicated to amplifying grassroots voices and making arts and culture accessible to all across Cumbria.

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NOTES

- 1 <https://www.equity.org.uk/news/2026/cut-in-funding-by-british-councils-threatens-arts-access>
- 2 **This lack of engagement with the topic of arts and culture may reflect the growing decline in arts education in England since 2010** - <https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/behind-the-numbers/>
- 3 **This gender disparity may reflect the reported differences in physical arts participation across England** - <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2023-24-annual-publication/main-report-for-the-participation-survey-may-2023-to-march-2024>
- 4 **A study by Obsurvant found that this was especially prevalent in those aged 18-30 since 2024** - <https://ntia.co.uk/why-young-people-are-going-out-less-ntia-study-reveals-economic-struggles-safety-concerns-and-transport-barriers-stifling-nightlife/>
- 5 <https://www.localgov.co.uk/Council-cuts-raise-concerns-over-arts-access/64082>
- 6 <https://www.prolificnorth.co.uk/news/more-than-half-of-creative-freelancers-report-rising-stress-as-budgets-tighten-and-unpaid-work-grows/>
- 7 <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/contribution-of-the-arts-to-society-and-the-economy/#heading-6>
- 8 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/117707/html/>
- 9 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/03/rising-cost-of-social-services-in-england-putting-arts-and-youth-services-at-risk-say-councils>