



Social and Cultural Infrastructure in the Creative and Cultural industries

Introduction

‘Social and cultural infrastructure’ refers to the spaces, structures and services that bring people together and that can strengthen the social and cultural fabric of our communities. The British Academy’s [Social and Cultural Infrastructure](#) programme engages with a growing body of evidence on the critical role this infrastructure plays in our societies.

Our most recent phase of work explored how social and cultural infrastructure can best be measured and valued, and what role different institutions and sectors, and the actors within each, play in creating, supporting and enhancing this infrastructure.

As part of the work focused on the role of institutions and sectors, the Academy held a series of roundtables in 2024, in conjunction with the National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) focused on [the role of universities](#) in relation to social and cultural infrastructure.

Following on from this exploration into the higher education sector, we held a pair of roundtables in January and February 2025 examining the role of the creative and cultural industries in creating, supporting and enhancing social and cultural infrastructure.

The principal question these roundtables aimed to explore was:

How can the creative and cultural industries, both individually and collectively, create, support and enhance social and cultural infrastructure to improve and sustain their local communities and places?

Online Roundtable

The first roundtable focused on how diverse institutions across the UK’s creative and cultural industries, create, support and enhance social and cultural infrastructure.

North East Roundtable

The second roundtable focused on the role of the creative and cultural industries in creating, supporting and enhancing social and cultural infrastructure in the North East of England specifically.

It is worth noting that although ‘creative and cultural industries’ is now a widely used umbrella term for a range of sectors, ‘creative’ and ‘cultural’ are not synonymous. The industries contained within them may generate some similar benefits to society, but there are nonetheless important distinctions to be respected.

These roundtables emphasised how the creative and cultural industries play an important role in enhancing social and cultural infrastructure. They strengthen and support the local areas in which they are located through building skills and job creation as well as providing time and space for many forms of creativity. Community engagement activity in these sectors can have a wide range of benefits including improved social, health, and environmental outcomes and a positive impact on psychological and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, cultural and creative initiatives are crucial in facilitating opportunities for creative expression within and across different places and communities. They are also beneficial for enabling voices that might otherwise feel marginalised or even silenced, to be heard. The creative and cultural industries hold a position of soft power and influence at local level and beyond, which can be harnessed to affect change through reaching hearts and minds on major societal issues.

This paper reflects the moment in which these events occurred within an evolving picture of devolution and other policy developments that continue to affect the sector. Some of the

context referred to here may have developed or changed since these discussions took place. The events brought together a wide range of stakeholders and representatives from across the creative and cultural industries including museums and heritage, film and TV, architecture, community arts, literature, dance, theatre, and visual art. A list of the participants is included at the end of this summary note.

A summary and synthesis of the discussions follows below. This account is intended to provide an overview of what was discussed and the thematic areas which arose. A range of policy ideas and insights emerged about the ways in which social and cultural infrastructure can be enhanced by the creative and cultural industries. These are reported as a reflection of the discussion and are not representative of formal policy positions of the British Academy, nor individual participants. Comments have not been attributed to specific participants or organisations, with the exception of the opening talks given by the programmed speakers at each session.

Roundtable 1: Social and Cultural Infrastructure and the UK's Creative and Cultural Industries

This roundtable was held online on 14 January 2025 and was chaired by **Professor Fiona Stafford FBA**, Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Oxford and member of the Academy's Social and Cultural Infrastructure Steering Group and Public Policy Committee. It focused on how social and cultural infrastructure is created, supported and enhanced by diverse institutions across the creative and cultural industries. This roundtable began with four short talks, followed by a roundtable discussion chaired by Professor Stafford.

Opening talks

Freelance creative producer and cultural adviser **Dominic Gray** spoke about his work at Opera North to gain Theatre of Sanctuary status for the organisation, which is the first and only opera company to receive this award for its work with refugees and asylum seekers.

In order to achieve 'Sanctuary' status, organisations are required to demonstrate three key principles in providing welcome, support and opportunity to those seeking refuge:

1. Learn about those who are seeking sanctuary.
2. Embed inclusion as part of their practice.
3. Share their vision and achievements with wider society.

Focusing solely on lived experience of participants is not always helpful when engaging vulnerable communities, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, through social and cultural infrastructure. These groups and individuals often benefit from creative projects as a form of escapism, and social and cultural infrastructure is well placed to provide this.

Genuine co-creation with refugees and asylum seekers is a slow process and can be complicated by the fact that people often move areas so it can be difficult to show impact through standard measures. There is also a risk that projects can become extractive if organisations are not sensitive and reflective in how they engage with participants and their communities.

Writer and arts practitioner **SuAndi OBE** spoke about the challenges and opportunities of working in partnership and across the borders of class, disability, race, and gender. SuAndi explained that social and cultural infrastructure is crucial in facilitating opportunities for expression within and across different communities. Facilitators working with marginalised groups should focus on listening, helping to provide a voice of clarity, and fostering an environment of mutual respect.

Much of SuAndi's career as a writer, performer and producer has focused on collaborative work that promotes the diversity of Black cultures and artists. She argued that we should start from a place of curiosity and find out what participants like, learning from them before we push forward with a project. While many creatives want to believe they are working in partnership, someone must lead the project, and everyone needs to feel connected. Commonality is integral to partnership working and it is important to gain the trust of the targeted group. Lead artists can be key in establishing trust and finding common ground, as they can draw on their own experiences and fragilities.

Dr Emily Hopkins from the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre gave an overview of the current policy context and goals for the sector, highlighting the importance of the creative industries in driving growth and vitality. She outlined some of the opportunities and challenges including place-based initiatives and ongoing regional disparities. Clusters, known as 'geographies of creativity', continue to drive employment and growth across communities and are key contributors to wider cultural and innovation ecosystems. There are a wide range of existing interventions of good practice across the sector including cluster investments, combined authority-led investment, corridor interventions, and infrastructure ownership.

Professor Angela McRobbie FBA gave a presentation on social fashion as a form of community engagement, upskilling and enhancement. Fashion micro enterprises, Angela argued, are a valuable part of the creative economy and offer a grounded regional practice for job creation. She described how the fashion industry suffers from an over-glamourised image and too often does not confront the intersectional issues of gender, class and ethnicity when it comes to access and employment within the sector. Berlin is a good model for Britain to follow in developing fashion as a social enterprise. There the fashion industry maintains subsidised studio spaces and works with local communities, such as by supporting women and girls facing disadvantage to gain opportunities.

Roundtable 2: Social and Cultural Infrastructure in the North East's Creative Industries

This roundtable was held in person at Baltic Centre of Contemporary Art in Gateshead on Thursday 13 February 2025. It was chaired by **Professor Katy Shaw**, Director of Cultural Partnerships, Northumbria University. It focused on the role of the creative and cultural industries in creating, supporting and enhancing social and cultural infrastructure in the North East. The session began with three short talks, followed by a roundtable discussion chaired by Professor Shaw.

Opening talks

Anna Disley, Executive Director (Programme & Impact) at New Writing North spoke about the organisation's place-based work in the region, which focuses on creating the conditions for communities to flourish. Their programmes focus on developing everyday creativity, supporting and developing talent, and commissioning new work. Creative programmes are an important means for building social connection, self-confidence, and a stake in society. New Writing North uses both infrastructural and embedded approaches through building consistency and working with communities to create the provision they want. This involves balancing open access spaces with a targeted approach to ensure inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Some of the barriers to adopting a social and cultural infrastructure approach include lack of trust, under-investment in communities, and concerns around safeguarding. Many arts organisation are finding themselves on the frontline dealing with issues in their communities that they are not necessarily equipped or trained for, such as mental health crises. While the creative sector doesn't necessarily see itself as part of social infrastructure, it is in fact a key player and has both the spaces and the relationships to support communities to thrive.

Adam Pugh, Director of Art Network North East (ANNE), shared his view that the umbrella term 'creative and cultural industries' is woolly and therefore unhelpful as it contains distinct components which can be easily confused. He suggested that creativity is a way of approaching the world, whereas culture is about shared values. In his role supporting visual artists through a place-based network, Adam explained there are three key actors:

1. The producer who makes the work.
2. The custodian who shows and sells work.
3. The gatekeeper who enables and strategizes.

More work is needed to improve the links between and within these roles, in order to establish sustained and sustainable interconnections that will support the sector to thrive. This would involve breaking down silos within the visual arts industry which exist around art forms, geographical areas, and funding levels. Artist-led informal networks are a great model for supporting producers as they can increase artist agency, help to establish a common vision, and offer a means for exchanging insights and expertise. There is a strong need for a robust and meaningful framework to support communities of artists. Adam is undertaking research to better understand why certain places and spaces are struggling to access funding, and what can be done to improve this.

Alison Clark, Head of Culture, Tourism and Sport at Durham County Council, spoke about the North East region's creative portfolio, drawing attention to the region's recent devolution deal that taps into culture, creativity, and tourism more deeply than in other parts of the country. In the North East of England, culture is central to place, and there is a whole set of plans that is being developed around this portfolio. Devolution is enabling the joining up of wider infrastructure, such as transport, skills and net zero, with culture at the heart of the plans. Working at place level is crucial to supporting the delivery of an ambitious culture plan. This involves talking to communities and meeting them where they are. A huge strength of the North East is its important industrial past and the strong social and cultural links associated with this. Supporting social and cultural infrastructure through devolution is not only about resources, but also about mindset; power, decision making and autonomy all need to be part of the process.

Themes and insights from roundtable discussions

A ‘social and cultural infrastructure’ framing is a useful invitation for the creative and cultural industries to think infrastructurally about the ways they support and strengthen their local communities. Numerous examples (from place-based socially-prescribed creative play for young children and carers, to taking over a disused cafe space to create a place for cross-cultural conversation) were shared to demonstrate how even relatively small infrastructural interventions can have a ripple effect that leads to large impacts for communities. Place can be a key component in the delivery and sustainability of successful social and cultural infrastructure.

Below is a synthesis of the key insights that emerged from the two roundtables, organised by theme.

Place and space

When it comes to delivering social and cultural infrastructure, a local focus is seen as an enabling rather than a restrictive factor. Participants recognised that physical spaces are important for social connection and for enabling people to develop hobbies. However, it can sometimes be difficult for smaller organisations in the creative and cultural industries to access suitable spaces due to the restrictive ownership and management of some buildings. Prohibitive rents, business rates, and availability of empty buildings were all cited as challenges when it comes to establishing and maintaining social and cultural infrastructure for organisations within this sector. For building-based cultural organisations, engagement with local communities is sometimes more impactful when it is taken to people ‘where they are’, especially if a cultural venue is perceived as intimidating or exclusionary. On the other hand, some groups particularly value visiting cultural spaces, even if they may not always be set up in a way that makes inclusion and interaction easy.

Example 1: Cultural venues and partnerships

One cultural venue shared the success of its partnership with a charity that works with adults with learning disabilities who visit their building to participate in activities on a regular basis. It was reported that many of the participants have started to think of the theatre as a home.

Example 2: Industrial heritage and redevelopment

In the North East, the availability of former industrial buildings can be an advantage for developing community-based social and cultural infrastructure. These are spaces that contribute to a sense of local identity which can be repurposed and reinvented as social and cultural infrastructure. However, the strong emotional attachment that many residents feel to their community’s industrial heritage can mean it is vital for redevelopment to take place carefully and sensitively. It is important to understand that people worked in these buildings within living memory and this can create a sense of loss and sadness that is not easy to reconcile with repurposing these spaces.

Wellbeing, self-expression and enjoyment

The power of art and creativity for enjoyment, enhanced wellbeing, imaginative freedom and confidence should not be underestimated, and the creative and cultural industries can give people the opportunity and the tools to express themselves in these ways. Through a social and cultural infrastructure approach, creative interventions can be delivered at scale within communities and targeted to their particular needs. This can have the effect of amplifying engagement and enabling greater participation in art and creativity by a wide range of publics.

However, while cultural and creative activity can often involve encouraging people to express their lived experience, some participants warned of a tendency to focus too much on trauma and other negative aspects of lived experience, which for some participants (such as refugees and asylum seekers) may be emotionally challenging and run counter to the aim of creating enjoyment and improving wellbeing.

People and community

When we talk about social and cultural infrastructure, there can be a tendency to focus on buildings, rather than on the networks and relationships that enable buildings to function as infrastructure for a community. For the creative industries and the kinds of value they bring to society, focusing on people rather than solely on buildings may help to identify the relationships and practices which create or enhance the value of social and cultural infrastructure.

It is also essential to find the right people to deliver a programme and to build meaningful relationships. Creative producers working with communities should start by talking to the people they want to engage and learn from them. Programmes and activities delivered by individuals with similar lived experiences as the target audience can be especially powerful and effective. Commonality is a key tool for working effectively together.

Measuring and valuing

The creative and cultural industries drive a wide range of benefits. Alongside economic growth, they play an important role in improving social, health and environmental outcomes and in upholding a broader set of values beyond that which can be easily measured such as creativity, social cohesion, and cultural heritage. In this way, they are an important vehicle for delivering inclusive growth to places and regions.

The question of how best to measure and value social and cultural infrastructure was raised, particularly in relation to long-term benefits which might also be affected by a range of internal and external factors to the industry and individual projects themselves. Yet many organisations struggle to translate qualitative experiences into data that can demonstrate their economic and social impact. Current work commissioned by the British Academy and undertaken by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy offers a measurement framework for social and cultural infrastructure that can be utilised by those wishing to better understand the value of their provision.

As well as emphasising the challenges around measuring and valuing impact, participants cautioned that the institutionalisation of social and cultural infrastructure work within larger organisations can take the energy out of it. The resource intensive reporting requirements that often accompany funding agreements along with the recurrent need to secure funding for projects may encourage prioritising metrics over real impact.

Example 3: Effectively measuring the impact of social and cultural infrastructure

Social and cultural infrastructure projects that focus on particular communities can find it difficult to articulate their full worth using traditional metrics. For example, projects that work with asylum seekers to support integration and offer opportunities for creative expression often struggle to consistently capture the engagement of their participants, particularly when they are moved to a different geographical area. Similarly, initiatives aimed at engaging and rehabilitating young offenders find it very difficult to quantify their impact, as they have no contact with participants once they are outside of the criminal justice system.

Inclusion

Barriers such as lack of time, encouragement, space and opportunity can make it difficult for people to access the benefits of social and cultural infrastructure.

Creative and cultural forms that sit outside of the mainstream or are generally positioned as 'outsider' or countercultural, such as graffiti and street art, can play an important role in building a sense of belonging in certain communities; not all creative and cultural value is produced within established venues such as galleries and theatres. However, the sector could work to create a more positive discourse and better practice of inclusion for all forms of creative expression that support different communities.

Partnerships and power dynamics

Partnerships can play an important role in building strong social and cultural infrastructure, but they can also bring complex power dynamics and challenges around alignment of purpose, timescales and accountability. For example, some artists find it difficult and problematic to operate within a system of competitive funding and top-down power structures.

Partnerships should be built up over time to help combat the problem of institutional memory. While project funding is always a priority, this should be balanced with working together to achieve long-term goals. It is important to consider what the afterlife or legacy of a project will be once it has concluded.

Capacity, expertise and sustainability

Social and cultural infrastructure interventions are most effective when creative and cultural organisations delivering community-based initiatives take the time to build relationships and hire staff who specialise in working with the target communities, such as youth workers or those with lived experience. Successful programmes may require upskilling of key staff members and should be built from the ground up and rooted in place.

Social and cultural infrastructure should start with grassroots engagement and build from there, with practitioners at the heart of the work. If a project is reaching out into a community, it is important to establish the right contacts and build relationships with those who understand the place and know what it needs.

The funding landscape was cited as a challenge that acutely affects smaller cultural organisations. There is also a risk of artists and practitioners experiencing burnout as they seek to deliver or even exceed their targets. Additionally, it is important to note that it is not just central government policy but also the state of the wider economy that matters for the sustainability of social and cultural infrastructure.

It is not feasible for all places and spaces to take on additional activities to enhance their role as social and cultural infrastructure or to support other social and cultural infrastructures in the community. Many organisations are operating under a huge amount of strain and resource constraints, and they may not be best placed to create or support social and cultural infrastructure.

Policy messages

Funding

Funding for social and cultural infrastructure ventures within the creative and cultural industries needs to be long-term, sustained and not dependent on targets. The importance of sustainable funding in relation to communities, including social and cultural infrastructure, was also a key policy message that emerged from the Academy's [Understanding Communities](#) collaboration with the Nuffield Foundation.

People

Creative and cultural organisations should be supported to develop their skills and capacity both in terms of project delivery and partnership building, as well as in areas such as evaluation and reporting. This can help to improve their social and cultural impact in communities. The crucial role that people play in enabling and delivering social and cultural infrastructure is a strong theme across this programme. For example, [this research report](#) on young people's views and experiences highlights that people are an important dimension of social and cultural infrastructure for young people, enabling young people to feel comfortable in spaces and places.

Place

Social and cultural infrastructure works best when it is sensitive to the needs of a place and the communities that live there, taking into account aspects such as local history and demography, the local economy, and existing structures and networks. Creative and cultural industries that are sensitive to place are best equipped to deliver the most social and cultural value within them. The importance of place sensitivity is explored in other British Academy policy work, including an in-depth exploration in the [Where We Live Next](#) programme.

Participant list

Details here were correct when these events took place in early 2025. Some individuals may have since moved roles/organisations.

Online Roundtable	
Participant	Role and organisation/institution
Professor Fiona Stafford FBA (Chair)	Professor of English Language and Literature, University of Oxford
Professor Dominic Abrams FBA OBE	Professor of Social Psychology; Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes, University of Kent
Lynn Barlow	Assistant Vice-Chancellor Creative and Cultural Industries Engagement, University of the West of England
Nicola Berkley	Senior Policy Adviser, The British Academy
Kerry Biggin	Take Part Creative Director, Matthew Bourne's New Adventures
Professor Anne Boddington	Emeritus Professor of Design Innovation, Kingston University; Trustee, Design Council
Iqra Choudhry	Policy Engagement Manager, Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre
Professor Rachel Cowgill	Professor of Music; Associate Dean for Research (Arts & Humanities); Director of the Humanities Research Centre, University of York
Snow Curtis Kolu	Policy Adviser, The British Academy
Dr Stephen Dobson	Director, Centre for Cultural Value
Dr Michael Eades	Head of Civic Engagement, Goldsmiths, University of London
Naomi French	Research and Engagement Manager, Churchill Fellowship
Jack Gamble	Director & CEO, Campaign for the Arts
Dr Abi Gilmore	Professor of Cultural Policy, University of Manchester; Policy Fellow in Cultural Placemaking, DCMS
Rose Goddard	Director, Cultural Philanthropy Foundation; Founder Director, Climate Fiction Prize
Dominic Gray	Freelance Creative Producer and Cultural Advisor
Professor David Hesmondhalgh FBA	Professor of Media, Music and Culture, University of Leeds
Chris Hildrey	Director, Hildrey Studio
Dr Emily Hopkins	Policy Adviser, Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre

Damon Jackson-Waldock	Programme Director, Art House Wakefield
Jennifer Johnston	Joint Head of Programmes, Into Film
Dr Patrycja Kaszynska	Senior Research Fellow, University of the Arts London
Tom Kiehl	Chief Executive, UK Music
Professor Justin Lewis FBA	Professor of Communication and Creative Industries, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Culture; Director, Clwstwr
Dr Peter Mackay	Senior Lecturer in Literature, University of St Andrews; The Scottish Makar
Rosa Marks	Research Assistant, Bennett Institute for Public Policy University of Cambridge
Michael McGregor	Director, Wordsworth Trust
Professor Angela McRobbie FBA	Emeritus Professor of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London
Dr Tyson Mitman	Senior Lecturer and Course Lead for Postgraduate Studies, York St John University
Dr Linda Monckton	Head of Wellbeing and Inclusion Strategy, Historic England
Marc Newall	Director of Policy, Publishers Association
Muyiwa Oki	President, Royal Institute of British Architects; Architect, Mace Group
Dr Dimitrios Panayotopoulos-Tsiros	Research Associate, Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge
Keir Powell-Lewis	Head of Environmental Sustainability, British Film Institute
Peter Reed	Director, Compass Live Art
Joanna Resnick	Chief Executive, Slung Low Theatre
Harman Sagger	Head Economist for Arts, Heritage and Tourism, DCMS
Professor Richard Sennett FBA	Centennial Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics
SuAndi	Freelance Cultural Director, National Black Arts Alliance
Isabelle Taylor	Policy Assistant, The British Academy
Dr Harriet Thompson	Policy Adviser, The British Academy
Kathryn Thomson	Chief Executive, National Museums NI
Laura Turner-Laing	Commercial Director, Creative UK
Dr Adam Wright	Head of Public Policy, The British Academy

North East Roundtable	
Participant	Role and organisation/institution
Professor Katy Shaw (Chair)	Director of Cultural Partnerships, Northumbria University
Nicola Berkley	Senior Policy Adviser, The British Academy
Alison Clark	Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism, Durham County Council
Professor Richard Clay	Professor of Digital Cultures and Co-Director of the Humanities Research Institute, Newcastle University
JonJoe Clennell	Assistant Producer, Moving Part Arts
Adam Cooper	Director, Threads in the Ground
Professor Rachel Cowgill	Professor of Music; Associate Dean for Research (Arts & Humanities); Director of the Humanities Research Centre, University of York
Snow Curtis Kolu	Policy Adviser, The British Academy
Dr Paige Davis	Research Fellow, Theatre Hullabaloo; Lecturer in Developmental Psychology, University of Leeds
Anna Disley	Executive Director, Programme & Impact, New Writing North
Mary Durkin	Board Member, The Lit & Phil
Professor Kirsten Gibson	Professor of Early Modern Music and Culture and Deputy Head of the School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University
Robby Graham	Artistic Director, Southpaw Dance Company
Bill Griffiths	Head of Programmes and Collections, North East Museums
Rebecca Huggan	Director, The NewBridge Project
Professor Simon James	Professor of English, Durham University
Catherine Johns	Executive Director, Dance City
Professor Sabine Junginger	Professor in Visual Communication and Digital Cultures, Northumbria University
Vikas Kumar	Director, GemArts
Leanne Littlewood	Culture House Director, Sunderland City Council
Marianne Locatori	Chief Executive, Theatre Royal Newcastle
Jim Mawdsley	Principal Advisor Events and Culture, Newcastle City Council
Samantha Peel	Programme Coordinator, AHRC Creative Communities
Adam Pugh	Director, Art Network North East

Amanda Rennison	Learning Team Leader, Baltic Centre of Contemporary Art
Andrew Rothwell	Culture and Tourism Manager, Newcastle City Council
Professor Jonathan Sapsed	Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Newcastle University

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