genecon

# Cumbria Cultural Impact & Advocacy Report

Evidence, story and advocacy: culture as Cumbria's connective infrastructure

October 2026

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Update 3 November 2026 – image caption for Highlights Rural Touring Case Study corrected

# Foreword

## Culture is already helping to deliver many of Cumbria's priorities at scale: jobs, investment, skills, wellbeing, thriving places and a strong visitor economy.

As Cumbria enters a new era of devolved leadership, the challenge is not whether culture matters, but whether it is recognised and used as a strategic asset in delivering those ambitions. Too often, culture is viewed as a beneficiary of growth and investment rather than one of the ways growth and investment are achieved. The evidence presented in this report points to a different conclusion.

Across Cumbria, arts, culture, heritage and creativity generate economic value, attract external funding, support employment, improve wellbeing, strengthen community connections and help make places more attractive to residents, visitors and businesses alike. Cultural organisations also provide something increasingly important in public policy terms: trusted relationships, established networks and delivery capacity that connect people and places across a large and dispersed rural county.

What makes Cumbria distinctive is the way these benefits are created. The county combines nationally significant cultural organisations, collections, festivals and programmes with a highly distributed network of practitioners, volunteers, community organisations and local venues. Together, they form a cultural ecology with national quality and local reach, capable of delivering impact at scales ranging from international tourism and inward investment to community wellbeing and neighbourhood participation.

The evidence gathered through this study suggests that culture should therefore be understood not simply as a sector, but as part of Cumbria's wider infrastructure for growth, opportunity and quality of life. Much of the value identified in this report is already being delivered, often despite significant capacity constraints and financial pressures. The opportunity is not to create cultural activity where none exists but to build on a strong foundation, strengthen what works and connect it more deliberately to the county's wider economic and social ambitions.

Devolution provides a timely opportunity to do exactly that. As new approaches emerge across economic development, skills, transport, health and place, there is an opportunity to position culture not as a standalone policy area but as a delivery partner across them all. The case set out in this report is therefore as much about Cumbria's future as it is about its cultural sector.

This report is offered as both evidence and invitation: evidence of culture's existing contribution to the county, and an invitation to the Cumbria Combined Authority, local authorities, businesses, funders and cultural partners to recognise, invest in and work with culture as a strategic partner in delivering Cumbria's next chapter.

Cumbria does not lack cultural quality, ambition or activity. The opportunity now is to turn those strengths into even greater value for the county's people, places and economy through investment, partnership, capacity and long-term strategic leadership.

Genecon was commissioned to produce this report on behalf of the Cumbria Cultural Impact Steering Group whose members are: Brewery Arts, Cumbria Museum Consortium (Tullie, Lakeland Arts and Wordsworth Grasmere) and Theatre by the Lake, supported by the Cumbria Arts & Culture Network and funded by Arts Council England.

# Executive summary

This report demonstrates that culture is already making a substantial contribution to Cumbria's economic, social and civic life. It generates employment and investment, supports a significant share of visitor spending, contributes to health and wellbeing, helps develop skills and talent, and strengthens the distinctiveness and vitality of places across the county.

The evidence points to a sector with national significance, deep local roots and considerable untapped potential. While much of this impact is already being delivered, it is often achieved through organisations operating at the limits of existing capacity.

**The evidence throughout this report points to a simple conclusion: culture is one of Cumbria's most valuable and versatile strategic assets**. It connects people to opportunity, communities to one another, visitors to place, and cultural activity to wider economic and social outcomes.

### Culture in Cumbria: the headline numbers[1]

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **£153m**<br>Direct GVA from arts, entertainment and recreation industries (2024)<br>ONS | **c.5,250**<br>Jobs directly within arts, entertainment and recreation sector<br>ONS BRES | **c.£113m**<br>External cultural investment attracted since 2022, equating to £2.79 of external investment attracted for every £1 of local authority spend<br>NLHF, 360Giving and Arts Council England Local Insights |
| **£500m+**<br>Annual culture-associated visitor spend<br>Genecon / Cumbria Tourism | **£375.9m**<br>GVA associated with culture-related visitor activity, equivalent to roughly £1 in every £9 spent in Cumbria's visitor economy<br>Genecon modelling | **9,300+**<br>Jobs supported across the wider economy by culture-associated visitor spending<br>Genecon modelling |
| **c.1.05m**<br>Annual engagements reported by 42 surveyed organisations<br>Cultural Organisations Survey | **63%**<br>Of surveyed organisations have operated for more than 20 years<br>Cultural Organisations Survey | **91%**<br>Of residents engage in arts and culture at least annually<br>DCMS Participation Survey 2023/24 |
| **£243m**<br>Annual health and wellbeing value from regular cultural engagement<br>Frontier Economics / DCMS | **£129m**<br>Annual life-satisfaction value from day-to-day heritage<br>Historic England | **49%**<br>of young creatives would prefer to stay and work in Cumbria<br>CACN / See It To Be It |

[1] These measures describe different dimensions of cultural value and should not be added together. Direct sector GVA and visitor-economy impacts overlap in part; wellbeing and social-value measures are also conceptually different from economic output. The £243m wellbeing and £129m heritage life-satisfaction estimates introduced below are complementary social-value measures and should not be added to the economic totals.

## Five headline findings

### 1. Culture is a significant part of Cumbria's productive economy.

It generates direct output and employment, attracts national and charitable investment, and is associated with substantial visitor spend that supports retail, hospitality, transport and other parts of the wider economy.

### 2. Cumbria combines national significance with distributed rural reach.

A spine of major cultural institutions, collections, festivals and programmes sits within a wider ecology of smaller organisations, freelancers, venues and community activity. Together they operate at scales ranging from international visitors to very local rural audiences.

### 3. Culture contributes across the county's wider priorities.

Culture is relevant to multiple Combined Authority and unitary authority portfolios, not only a standalone cultural brief. The evidence shows material contributions to skills and talent, health and wellbeing, community connection, town-centre vitality, place identity, rural access and the visitor economy.

### 4. The sector is highly resourceful, but much of its impact is being delivered at the limits of current capacity.

Surveyed organisations report strong longevity, social purpose and partnership working, yet 86% experience infrastructure limitations and 55% face workforce or recruitment challenges. Around 417 FTE staff sit alongside roughly 1,731 freelancers and 1,860 volunteers.

### 5. Cumbria has genuine headroom for growth.

Comparable rural visitor economies such as Cornwall and North Yorkshire support larger arts, entertainment and recreation sectors. Cumbria already has quality, ambition and recognised assets; strengthening capacity, creative skills and career pathways, and strategic integration could translate those strengths into greater economic and social value. This is not simply about growing the capacity of the cultural sector and securing the associated benefits. It is about using the sector's capability across Cumbria's wider economy, including its direct contribution to the visitor economy, talent attraction and retention, and the vitality of places in which people choose to live and work.

## Four strategic priorities

| | |
|---|---|
| **1. Commission the next Cultural Strategy and Infrastructure Framework**<br><br>Develop a countywide Cultural Strategy and Cultural Infrastructure Framework in collaboration with the cultural sector to identify shared priorities, spatial investment needs, infrastructure to protect or grow, and common measures of impact. | **2. Invest in capacity and proven delivery**<br><br>Support the organisational, workforce and partnership capacity that enables cultural assets to leverage funding, employ people, collaborate and deliver at scale; create routes to sustain and scale programmes that demonstrate impact. |
| **3. Build paid pathways into creative work**<br><br>Use apprenticeships, traineeships, placements and entry-level roles to strengthen the transition from creative education and early interest into sustainable employment and enterprise. | **4. Recognise culture as cross-cutting infrastructure**<br><br>Embed culture within economic development, skills, visitor economy, health and wellbeing, regeneration and place policy rather than treating it solely as a discrete cultural portfolio. |

# 1. Culture's contribution to Cumbria now

*The case for culture begins with what it already delivers. The evidence points to four areas where the contribution is strongest and most relevant to Cumbria's strategic priorities: inclusive economic growth and the visitor economy; skills, talent and employment; health, wellbeing and stronger communities; and thriving places and communities.*

## 1.1 Inclusive economic growth and the visitor economy

Culture is part of Cumbria's productive economy. Arts, entertainment and recreation industries generated an estimated £153m in GVA in 2024 and support around 5,250 jobs. Cultural organisations have also attracted an estimated £113m of external investment into Cumbria since 2022 through Arts Council England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and national grant-making trusts and foundations recorded through 360Giving. Benchmarking against local authority arts and culture expenditure indicates that every £1 spent locally has been associated with approximately £2.79 attracted from external sources - demonstrating culture's ability to leverage additional investment into the county.

Much of this investment has helped enable wider regeneration and economic development ambitions, from cultural programmes in Barrow and West Cumbria to major capital investment in assets including Windermere Jetty, Wordsworth Grasmere and Project Tullie. Culture is therefore not only an economic sector in its own right, but a route through which national and charitable investment is brought into Cumbria's towns and rural communities.

### 1.1.1 Culture also creates value beyond the sector itself

Cumbria welcomed 40.7 million visitors in 2025, according to Cumbria Tourism's STEAM Tourism Volume and Value data. Genecon's modelling applies national visitor-survey evidence to estimate the share of day, overnight and international visits motivated by arts, culture and heritage, producing an estimate of more than £500m a year in culture-associated visitor spending. Set against Cumbria's £4.6bn visitor economy, this is equivalent to roughly £1 in every £9 of visitor expenditure. The spending is allocated to the sectors in which it occurs and run through Genecon's Cumbria input-output model. This estimates direct, indirect and induced effects as spending circulates through accommodation and food, retail, transport and local supply chains, producing approximately £375.9m of associated GVA and more than 9,300 jobs. These are wider visitor-economy effects, not direct cultural-sector output.

Culture therefore makes a material contribution to Cumbria’s visitor economy, not simply an additional amenity. It generates spend directly and supports activity across accommodation, food and drink, retail and transport. The growth opportunity is to use that cultural offer more deliberately to encourage longer stays, wider geographic dispersal and more off-peak visits.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

***Potfest: creative enterprise, maker development and visitor spend***

Over three decades Potfest has brought more than 1,500 ceramics artists into the county and now attracts more than 12,000 visitors a year to the Eden Valley, including visitors from outside Cumbria and overseas. It combines a visitor draw with a progression route for makers from hobbyist practice to professional careers.




Image: courtesy of potfest.co.uk

### 1.1.2 A growth opportunity in the wider creative industries

The relationship between culture and the wider creative industries is important for future growth. Cumbria's creative industries comprise around 920 businesses employing approximately 3,500 people. They account for around 3.5% of all businesses - a comparatively small share against places with similar rural and visitor-economy characteristics such as North Yorkshire and Cornwall.

Analysis applying the DCMS creative-industries classification to ONS UK Business Counts shows that music, performing and visual arts account for 14.1% of Cumbria's creative-industry businesses, making this the largest cultural sub-sector and second only to IT and software across the wider classification. Film, television, video, radio and photography account for a further 11.4%, demonstrating an established screen and media base with significant scope for growth. Targeted investment in enterprise, production capacity, skills and career pathways could help Cumbria capitalise on this potential, while a stronger cultural ecology would support development across the creative industries by building identity, networks, audiences and the quality of place needed to attract and retain creative businesses and talent.

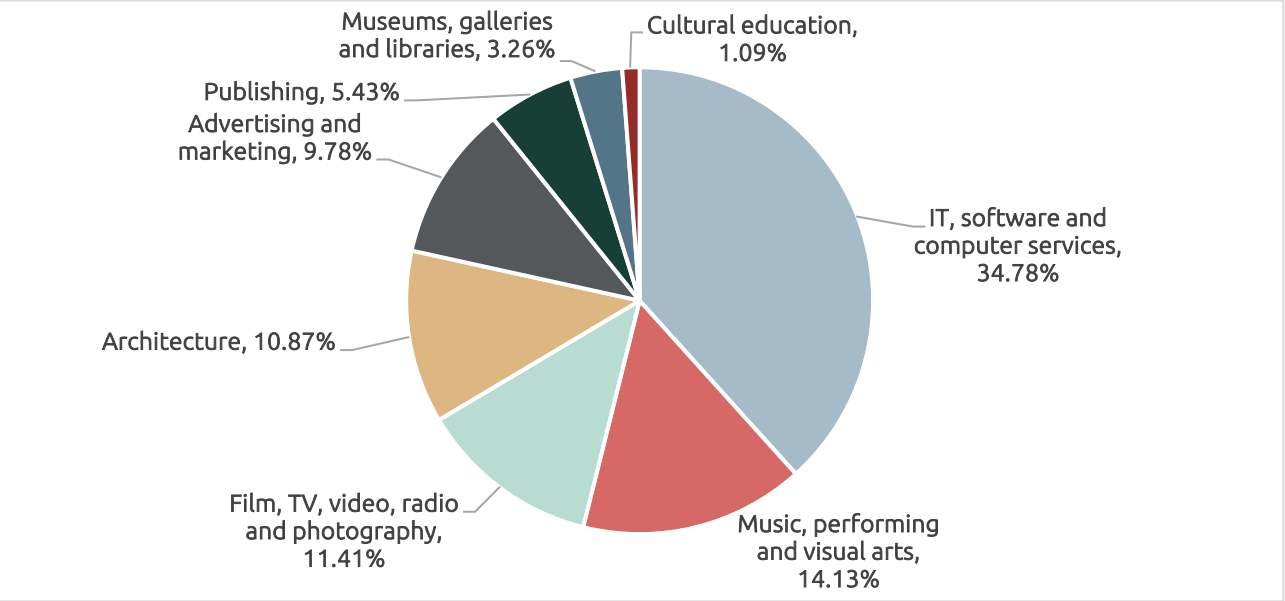



Figure 1 – *Creative industries business and employment figures apply the DCMS creative industries classification to ONS UK Business Counts and BRES data for Cumbria, with sub-sector shares and geographic concentrations derived from the same source.*

Benchmarking indicates genuine headroom for growth. In 2024, arts, entertainment and recreation generated £153m in Cumbria, equivalent to 0.95% of the county's total GVA. Comparable rural and visitor economies derive a greater proportion of their economic output from the sector: 1.32% in North Yorkshire (£264m) and 1.55% in Cornwall (£237m). The difference is therefore not simply a function of economic or population size. Cumbria already supports a strong network of recognised cultural organisations; the opportunity is to convert that existing quality into greater economic scale.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

### *Kendal Calling: cultural activity with a measurable regional economic impact*

Independent auditors estimated Kendal Calling's regional economic impact at £23.4m in 2023. Sold out every year since 2006, the festival also provides a career-building platform for artists and has donated more than £300,000 to Cumbrian and North West charities and community groups.



Image: Biffy Clyro at KC26, photo by Tom Martin

### 1.1.3 Culture can increase the value of Cumbria's visitor offer

Cumbria's landscape remains its most powerful visitor asset. Culture complements that strength by giving people more reasons to stay longer, explore beyond the central Lakes, return outside peak periods and spend in towns and communities across the county.

Cumbria's landscape remains its most powerful visitor asset. Culture complements that strength by giving people more reasons to stay longer, explore beyond the central Lakes, return outside peak periods and spend in towns and communities across the county. Cumbria's Destination Management Plan identifies increasing the value and productivity of the visitor economy as a core objective and emphasises the importance of world-class visitor experiences, destination identity and place-making in achieving that ambition. Arts, culture and heritage contribute directly to these aims by animating places, revealing distinctive local stories and creating experiences that encourage visitors to engage more deeply with Cumbria beyond its landscape alone. The opportunity is therefore not to position culture against landscape, but to use culture to broaden the offer, support wider geographic dispersal and increase the economic and social value generated by the visitors the landscape already attracts.

## 1.2 Skills, talent and employment

The study's education and skills analysis identified 32 schools on a current Artsmark journey, alongside around 600 students studying creative A-level subjects each year and a further 210 undertaking creative FE courses. Local providers also report retention rates above those seen in many other subject areas. There is little evidence here of a lack of interest in creativity or creative learning.

What is more apparent is a weakening connection between that interest and future career ambitions. Cumbria Careers Hub data show creative and media careers falling from 24% of Year 7 pupils' preferred route to 11% by Year 11, while engineering rises to 22%. Sector leaders attribute this partly to the prominence of major manufacturing employers within careers provision and the relative absence of creative role models and industry engagement. Schools identify this gap themselves, but many cultural organisations lack the capacity and resources to provide sustained careers support at scale.

Those concerns become more pronounced in the transition from education into employment. Roundtable participants described limited higher-level provision, gaps between education and employment, difficulty accessing commissions and entry-level opportunities, and a perception that young creatives must leave Cumbria to progress. Employers reported longstanding vacancies in specialist and technical roles, while See It To Be It research found that almost half of young creatives would prefer to stay and work in the county. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the primary issue is not talent or ambition, but the visibility and availability of routes into sustainable creative employment.

The implications extend beyond the cultural sector itself. Genecon's modelling estimates around 11,600 creative jobs across Cumbria's wider economy, representing around 4.5% of total employment and including creative occupations in retail, architecture and engineering, computer programming and public administration. Strengthening progression into creative work is therefore not simply about supporting artists and cultural organisations; it is also about retaining skills and creative capability that contribute to growth across the wider economy.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

***See It To Be It: a proof of concept for coordinated creative careers support***

See It To Be It is a Place Partnership project led by Cumbria Arts & Culture Network and funded by Arts Council England. It connects schools, colleges, employers and freelancers, creating traineeships, showcases and progression opportunities and building awareness of creative careers from primary age onwards. The pilot demonstrates that coordinated sector action can support talent retention and progression; the next challenge is to sustain and scale that model beyond its current funding period.




Image: See It To Be It, Brewery Arts, courtesy of CACN

### 1.2.1 The growth dividend of creative skills

Creative skills are therefore part of Cumbria's wider growth infrastructure, not simply a workforce issue for cultural organisations. This matters increasingly as the economy changes. Skills England projects that employment in priority creative occupations will grow by around 416,000 jobs - 27% - between 2025 and 2035, while employers surveyed by the World Economic Forum expect 39% of workers' core skills to change by 2030, with creative thinking among the capabilities expected to become more important. UK analysis by Creative PEC and Nesta, drawing on 35 million job adverts, similarly found that demand for creativity is particularly associated with occupations expected to grow - and extends well beyond jobs conventionally defined as part of the creative industries. There is also evidence of a measurable growth dividend: Forrester Consulting research commissioned by Adobe found that companies fostering creativity were 3.5 times more likely to report annual revenue growth of 10% or more than less creative firms - 58% compared with 20%.

For Cumbria, this creates a double opportunity. Strengthening cultural engagement and education can build creativity, communication, collaboration and adaptability from an early age, while stronger paid progression routes can convert that capability into local employment. This would help grow Cumbria's cultural and creative industries - themselves part of a nationally identified growth sector - while also strengthening the supply of creative skills available to employers across the wider economy.

Strengthening the cultural skills pathway is therefore an economic-growth intervention: it can expand the workforce available to sectors with growth potential, increase the creative capability of Cumbria's wider labour market, and give more young people a viable route to build careers in the county rather than having to look elsewhere for progression.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

### *Helping Hands: cross-Cumbria volunteering and culture-led investment*

Helping Hands was a cross-Cumbria, cross-sector volunteering programme led through the Cumbria Museum Consortium, placing volunteering, skills and wellbeing at the heart of the county's museums and heritage sites. It built partnerships across the county, attracted external investment into Cumbria and generated strong evidence of social and economic return. It was also the forerunner to See It To Be It, which built directly on the partnership-working practice Helping Hands developed.




Photo by Adrian Naik of Naik Media

## 1.3 Health, wellbeing and stronger communities

Culture contributes to prevention, participation and social connection. This is particularly relevant in a county where rural isolation, ageing, mental health and unequal access to services shape the lived experience of communities.

Cumbria has high levels of cultural participation: 91% of residents engage in arts and culture at least once a year and 76% attend a cultural event or venue. National evidence associates regular cultural engagement with improved wellbeing, reduced loneliness, confidence, purpose and prevention of ill health.

National research now allows this engagement to be valued. Regular cultural participation is estimated to generate around £243m of health and wellbeing value to Cumbria residents each year (Frontier Economics / DCMS methodology, using Treasury Green Book-aligned QALY and WELLBY methods), equivalent to roughly £996 per adult[2].

The organisational survey shows these outcomes are not peripheral to cultural delivery. Among respondents, 81% identified wellbeing and health as an outcome of their work, 76% community cohesion, 71% youth engagement and 55% rural inclusion. Cultural organisations also partner extensively outside the sector: 81% work with community or civic organisations, 76% with schools and education, and 31% with health or NHS partners.

The value lies partly in how culture works. Cultural organisations often provide non-clinical, trusted spaces; participatory approaches; local relationships; and routes to people who may be less comfortable engaging with formal services. Culture does not replace health or public services, but it can strengthen prevention, connection and community-based support.

[2] This is a complementary measure of social value and is not additive to the economic figures set out earlier.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

### *Every Brilliant Thing: culture as a route into difficult conversations*

Theatre by the Lake's community touring model takes professionally produced work into village halls and community venues. Its production of Every Brilliant Thing, focused on mental health and suicide, created an accessible setting for conversation in communities where suicide is a significant concern. Audience feedback described people reflecting on and changing aspects of their own lives after seeing the work.




Photo by Chris Payne

## 1.3.1 Rural connection is part of this story, not a separate one

Cumbria's geography affects who can participate, volunteer and work. Forty-eight per cent of surveyed organisations cite transport as a barrier to audience participation, while 69% of independent creatives say transport or geography affects their ability to work across the county.

The cultural response has been practical: rural touring, community venues, mobile provision and locally selected programming take activity to people rather than assuming people can travel to major centres. Libraries, village halls, museums, churches and community spaces form part of that wider social infrastructure.

Rather than treating rural connectivity as a standalone cultural outcome, the evidence suggests it is a cross-cutting condition shaping health, skills, participation, employment and place. Future transport and infrastructure planning should therefore consider cultural access alongside access to work, education and services.

*'There's a lot of stuff in Cumbria that people don't necessarily expect to find… we're all doing stuff which you might expect in a city, but not in a rural area.'*

Roundtable participant, cultural organisation

IMPACT EXAMPLE

### *Highlights and Arts Out West: cultural infrastructure without a single central building*

Highlights and Arts Out West take professionally produced work into more than 65 village halls and community spaces across Cumbria and the wider North. The model shows how local promoters, touring networks and community buildings together function as cultural and social infrastructure in places where a permanent venue would not be viable.



Image: Ceyda Tanc Dance at Vindolanda as part of a residency in Gilsland - photo by Kit Haigh

## 1.4 Thriving places and communities

Culture helps make places distinctive, active and investable. It shapes how communities see themselves, how visitors understand Cumbria, and whether towns and rural places offer the social and cultural life that residents and workers expect.

Place identity is the most widely reported development outcome in the organisational survey: 88% of respondents say their work contributes to it. Sixty-nine per cent identify visitor-economy outcomes and one third identify high-street vitality. This is reflected in the roundtables, where participants repeatedly described culture as a source of pride, belonging and a way of telling a fuller story of Cumbria beyond landscape alone.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

### *BarrowFull: reaching people who least engage*

Between 2020 and 2026 BarrowFull generated more than 216,000 creative engagements, with 67% from groups who usually least engage with arts and culture. The programme demonstrates the role of sustained, place-based cultural activity in participation, pride, wellbeing and routes back into community life.



Images: Festival of Colours and Starlight by the Barrow, courtesy of Barrowfull

Historic England modelling indicates that day-to-day experiences of heritage assets in Cumbria deliver an estimated £129m of improved life satisfaction to residents each year. Its Heritage and Pride in Place research (2023) found historic buildings the third strongest source of local pride, with 42% agreeing that historic buildings and monuments make them feel proud of their area. As with the wellbeing estimate, this is a complementary social-value measure rather than an addition to economic output.

Businesses also identified a practical place challenge. Responses called for more life in towns beyond the working day, stronger live entertainment and cultural provision, and more imaginative use of old buildings. Cultural assets are therefore part of the infrastructure that helps town centres remain animated and attractive to residents, workers and visitors.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

### *Tullie and Lloyd Motor Group: business and culture in partnership*

In 2026, Lloyd Motor Group became a key partner of Tullie, supporting family and community engagement through sponsorship of the museum's new Play Zone and wider community activity. The partnership demonstrates how businesses can invest in culture to strengthen local identity, support community wellbeing and create shared value. The opportunity now is to create more structured routes for partnerships of this kind and position culture as an equal partner in Cumbria's future growth.

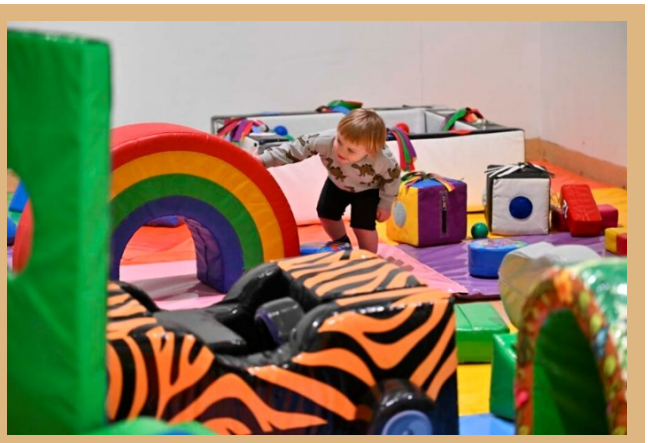


Image: The Lloyd Motor Group-sponsored Play Zone at Tullie, photo by Stuart Walker

Cumbria's environmental identity belongs within this place story. Landscape, heritage, industrial history and environmental change are deeply intertwined with the county's culture. Cultural organisations can interpret and animate those assets, support low-carbon reuse of buildings, and engage communities with questions of landscape, biodiversity, energy and environmental transition. The evidence is strongest where environmental action is linked to place, heritage and community rather than treated as a standalone cultural outcome.

IMPACT EXAMPLE

### *Piel View House: culture-led reuse and low-carbon regeneration*

Full of Noises restored Piel View House in Barrow Park, a heritage building previously earmarked for demolition, as a low-carbon cultural venue fitted with a heat pump, triple glazing and extensive insulation. Since reopening in 2022 it has welcomed more than 10,000 residents and visitors and built a national and international profile for Barrow.



Image: Performance of Guitar Trio by Rhys Chatham @ Piel View House, 25/04/2026. Photo by Sophie Broadgate and Laurence Campbell.

# 2. Why Cumbria's cultural model is distinctive

*Cumbria's cultural strength does not lie in a single city, institution or artform. It comes from the relationship between nationally significant cultural anchors and a distributed network of organisations, practitioners, festivals and community spaces shaped by the county's geography.*

## 2.1 National significance with deep local roots

A distributed ecology is not the same as a thin one. Cumbria has a spine of significant cultural anchors, including a strong group of Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisations, museums and heritage organisations with nationally important collections, producing and presenting organisations, festivals and ACE Creative People and Places programmes.

These are not just local assets; several operate at national scale or connect Cumbria directly into national cultural networks. Tullie Museum in Carlisle attracts c.200,000 visitors a year and works with well over double the pupil numbers of many comparable organisations. Wordsworth Grasmere holds a nationally important collection - among the first to be Designated, in 1997 - with Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere Journals inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. Lakeland Arts combines nationally important collections with major cultural infrastructure including Windermere Jetty Museum, demonstrating the county's capacity to secure investment in cultural assets of national quality and reach.

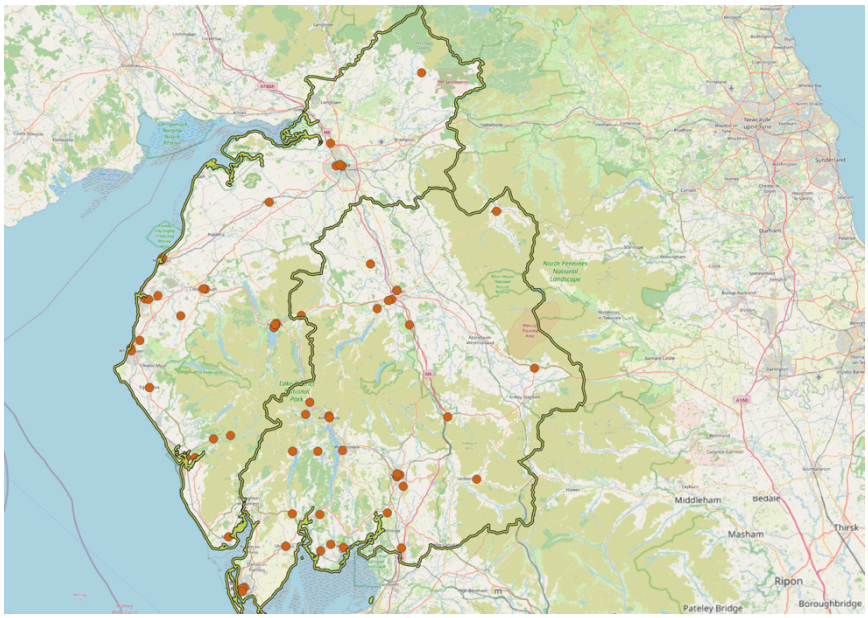
Cumbria is also a place where nationally relevant work is made, presented and shared. Theatre by the Lake is one of the UK's leading rural producing theatres, commissioning, co-producing and touring work rooted in Cumbria while bringing nationally significant artists, productions and creative partnerships into the county - a role recognised through its UK Theatre Award for Excellence in Touring. Brewery Arts provides another major cultural anchor, connecting audiences and creative practitioners in South Lakeland to a broad programme of live performance, cinema, music and participation, while supporting the development and presentation of work within the county.

That national connectivity extends beyond the major institutions. Organisations including Grizedale Arts and Signal Film & Media connect artists and communities in Cumbria with wider national and international practice; festivals such as Lakes International Comic Art Festival and Kendal Calling bring audiences, artists and profile into the county; while Creative People and Places programmes BarrowFull and Everyone Here bring nationally supported approaches to community-led cultural development into places across Cumbria.

This national standing matters because it works in both directions: Cumbria's cultural organisations bring artists, productions, audiences, investment and ideas into the county, while giving locally made work, creative talent, collections and stories routes to audiences and partners beyond it. Cultural organisations have attracted c.£113 million of external investment into Cumbria since 2022, demonstrating the role that credible, investable cultural organisations play in connecting the county to national funding and networks.

These anchors provide skilled employment, commission and employ freelancers, care for collections, produce and present work, develop talent, build national partnerships and draw visitors into the county. Around them sits a wider network of smaller organisations, community-led activity and independent practitioners that brings reach, responsiveness and deep local relationships.

The relationship between the two is central. Larger anchors create infrastructure, quality, employment, profile and investability; the wider ecology extends cultural activity into communities and places that no single institution could reach alone. Cumbria's distinctiveness lies in the combination: cultural organisations capable of operating on a national stage while remaining deeply embedded in the places and communities from which their work grows.




### A significant ecology in numbers

The study's working register maps 78 cultural organisations, venues and networks and 24 festivals and events across Cumbria. It is a working map rather than a complete census, but demonstrates the geographic spread and breadth of the sector.

Figure 2 – GIS mapping of Cumbria's cultural sector (full list of mapped organisations and festivals can be found in the Technical Annex).

## 2.2 Culture as connective infrastructure

Across the research, geography repeatedly shaped the way participants described culture. Cumbria is a county of towns, villages, valleys and communities separated by distance and constrained in places by limited public transport. Cultural activity often performs a convening role within that geography.

Festivals, museums, arts centres, theatres, touring programmes, libraries, village halls, community organisations and informal creative activity connect people locally. Larger organisations connect those places to national networks, artists, funding and visitors. Skills programmes connect young people to employers. Cultural tourism connects the visitor economy to the stories and identities of individual places.

This is what is meant here by connective infrastructure. The issue is not that the cultural sector itself is poorly connected. The evidence shows considerable collaboration. The issue is not that the sector lacks connections, but that the capacity and infrastructure sustaining them is limited, and the links between culture and wider systems - skills, health, transport, business, tourism and regeneration - could be stronger and more impactful.

Culture is most valuable as connective infrastructure when it is understood not as a single service, but as a network linking people, places, opportunities and wider public outcomes.

## 2.3 A high-performing sector operating at the limits of capacity

The research reveals a strong culture of initiative and social purpose. 63% of surveyed organisations have operated for more than 20 years. Twenty-four per cent of arts, recreation and entertainment businesses are registered non-profits, with a further 6% public-sector entities. Roundtables repeatedly described a "can-do" ethos: people starting programmes, festivals and organisations because otherwise the activity would not exist.

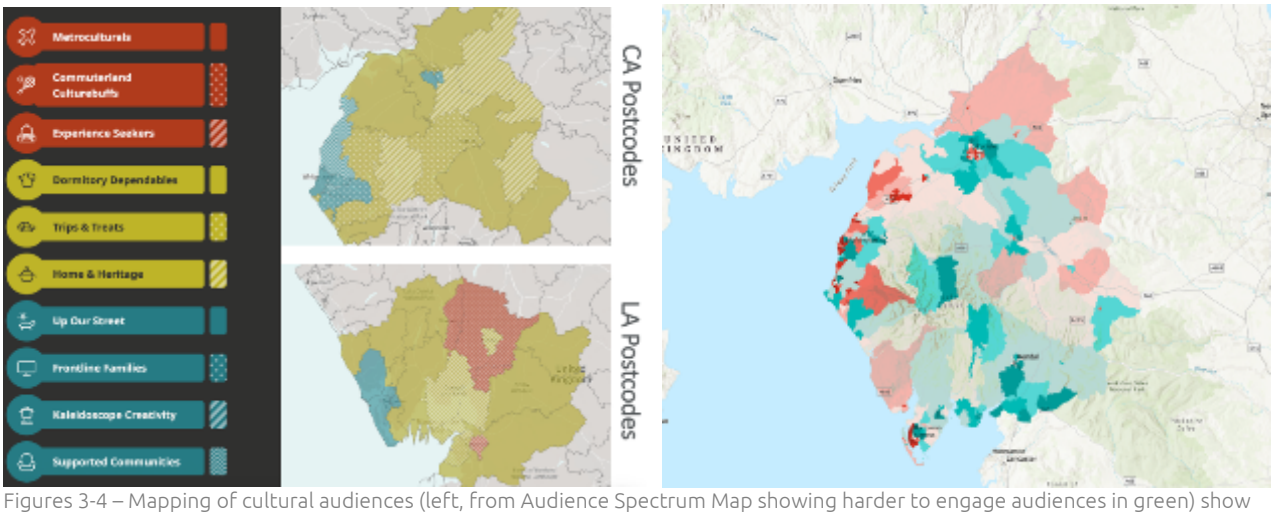
That resourcefulness has produced innovation and deep community ownership, but it should not be confused with spare capacity. Surveyed organisations reported around 417 FTE staff alongside approximately 1,731 freelancers and 1,860 volunteers. Eighty-six per cent experience infrastructure limitations, and 55% report workforce or recruitment challenges.

The same pressure appears among independent creatives. Thirty-seven per cent of surveyed practitioners earn less than a quarter of their income from creative practice, while 26% rely on it for all of their income. Access to commissions, affordability, isolation, workspace and visibility were recurrent challenges.

## 2.4 Geography creates different needs - and requires better strategic evidence

The cultural map is polycentric rather than dominated by one centre. Kendal and Penrith have the largest mapped concentrations, followed by Carlisle, Keswick, Barrow and Ulverston. Cultural activity is also spread through smaller towns, rural areas and the west coast, often through festivals, museums, touring and community-led organisations.

This geography creates uneven access and different forms of provision. DCMS participation data indicate lower attendance in Cumberland than in Westmorland & Furness, while local mapping points to areas where permanent provision is relatively thin. At the same time, a simple count of assets does not reveal their scale, reach, quality, accessibility or economic role.




Figures 3-4 – Mapping of cultural audiences (left, from Audience Spectrum Map showing harder to engage audiences in green) show low likelihood of cultural engagement aligns with higher levels of deprivation (right showing areas based on Indices of Multiple Deprivation with highest deprivation shown in red/dark red)

This report therefore stops short of recommending a definitive spatial investment hierarchy. That question requires a fuller Cultural Strategy and Cultural Infrastructure Framework mapping cultural assets and participation to strategic imperatives such as socio-economic deprivation, transport, economic opportunity, planned development and the condition of existing infrastructure.

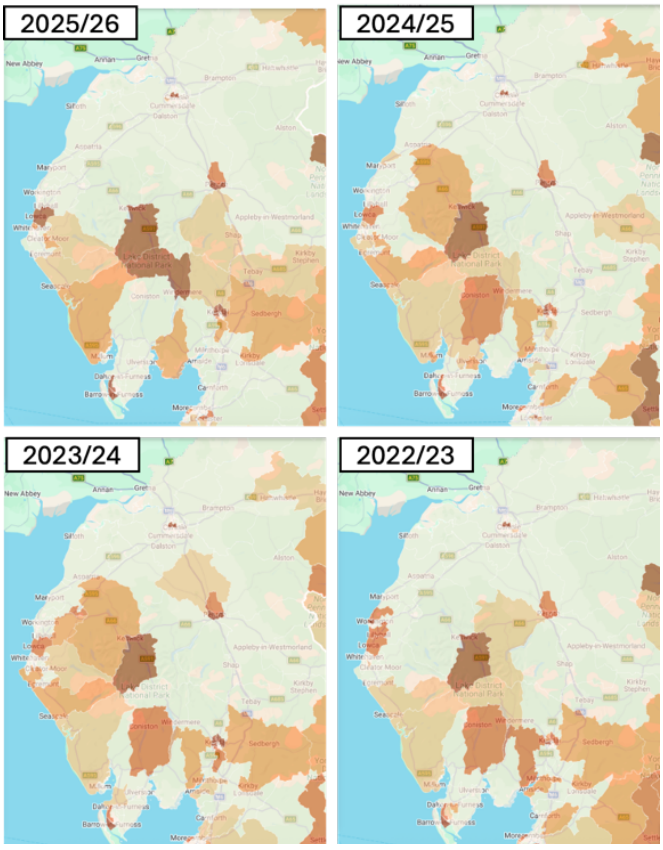



Figure 5 – Map showing annual Arts Council England funding by electoral ward in Cumbria.

# 3. Unlocking greater impact

*Cumbria does not need to choose between protecting what exists and pursuing growth. The evidence supports a twin approach: strengthen and connect proven assets now, while commissioning the strategic work needed to target future investment where there are clear gaps and opportunities.*

## 3.1 Responding to Cumbria's growth challenge

The investment case is therefore not based on a weak sector needing rescue. It is based on a motivated sector already delivering substantial value with constrained core capacity. Investment in people, organisations and connective functions can protect existing impact while creating the conditions for growth. The appropriate scale of investment should be established through the proposed Cultural Strategy and Cultural Infrastructure Framework, using asset condition, organisational capacity, workforce needs, geographic gaps, deliverability and potential public value to prioritise a phased investment programme.

The opportunity described in this report aligns closely with the emerging priorities of Cumbria's three strategic authorities. Westmorland & Furness places economy and culture together within its Council Plan and identifies culture's contribution to health, learning, creative industries and the visitor economy. Cumberland's Economic and Inclusive Growth Strategy identifies the visitor and leisure economy and culture as an economic opportunity alongside skills, investment, thriving places and its major industrial strengths. At county level, Cumbria's growth agenda focuses on thriving places, skills and employability, the visitor economy, infrastructure and inclusive growth.

Culture cuts across these agendas. It can help develop and retain skills, increase visitor value, attract external investment, strengthen towns and communities and make Cumbria an attractive place in which to live and work. The propositions that follow should therefore be understood not simply as asks *for culture*, but as practical ways in which Cumbria's cultural assets can respond to the county's growth challenge and help deliver wider strategic priorities.

## 3.2 Act and invest now

### *Recognise culture as cross-cutting infrastructure*

Build culture explicitly into economic development, visitor economy, skills, health and wellbeing, regeneration, transport and place strategies across Cumbria. Cultural outcomes should be treated as part of these agendas rather than added after priorities are set, with the Combined Authority, unitary authorities and other strategic partners recognising cultural organisations as delivery partners.

### *Invest in organisational and partnership capacity*

Support the core capacity that allows organisations and networks to plan, employ people, build partnerships, attract external funding and collaborate across the county. Short-term project funding alone cannot sustain the connective work on which countywide impact depends. The case for investment is strengthened by the sector's proven ability to generate return: since 2022, cultural organisations have helped attract around £113m of external investment, equating to £2.79 leveraged for every £1 invested locally. Sustained investment in organisational and partnership capacity is therefore not simply support for the sector itself, but a means of unlocking further economic and social value for Cumbria.

### *Create paid post-18 routes into creative careers*

Build a creative skills pathway that supports Cumbria's growth. Work with employers, FE/HE providers, sector networks and funders to expand traineeships, apprenticeships, placements and entry-level jobs, strengthening the transition from education into paid work. Treat creative capability as relevant to Cumbria's wider workforce needs as well as to the cultural sector itself, and build progression opportunities that make staying, returning or relocating to Cumbria viable.

### *Scale proven models*

Move successful pilots and place-based programmes toward sustainable delivery where evaluation demonstrates impact and demand. This includes creative-careers, participation, health and rural-delivery models; scaling should be based on evidence rather than creating new pilots by default.

### *Use culture to increase visitor-economy value*

Integrate cultural experiences into destination development, marketing and business partnerships to encourage longer stays, wider geographic dispersal and activity outside peak periods. This directly supports the county's ambition to increase the year-round value and productivity of the visitor economy while widening Cumbria's offer beyond its best-known destinations.

### *Protect and make better use of existing cultural and civic assets*

Recognise venues, museums, libraries, community spaces, studios and other cultural infrastructure as part of thriving places. Where assets are underused, explore creative reuse; where a strategically important asset is vulnerable, understand the consequences of its loss before decisions are made.

## 3.3 Build the next strategic framework

The evidence gathered through this study, together with evidence supplied by the cultural sector, provides a strong foundation, but translating impact into long-term change will require a coordinated strategic framework for culture across Cumbria. A countywide Cultural Strategy should establish a shared vision for the contribution of culture to the region's economic growth, community wellbeing and placemaking ambitions, setting clear priorities and a practical route to delivery.

Alongside this, there is an opportunity to develop a Cultural Infrastructure Framework that brings together data on cultural assets, participation, accessibility, population change, deprivation, transport connectivity and economic opportunity. This would provide a stronger evidence base for investment decisions, helping partners identify where assets should be protected, strengthened or expanded and where intervention could deliver the greatest public value.

Future work should also establish a shared outcomes and evidence framework aligned to Combined Authority priorities. A common set of measures would enable organisations and partners to demonstrate their collective contribution to economic growth, skills, health, wellbeing, participation and place, reducing reliance on fragmented organisational reporting and creating a more compelling case for investment.

Finally, there is scope to move from broad cross-sector alignment towards a programme of practical delivery partnerships. Developing joint propositions around culture and skills, health, the visitor economy, regeneration, and transport and accessibility would help clarify shared objectives, strengthen the evidence base for intervention and create clearer routes to future funding and investment.

## 3.4 Shared governance: a strategic voice for culture

The emerging governance landscape would be most effective where there is a distinction between public strategic leadership and cultural sector voice. The Cumbria Combined Authority, a Mayoral Combined

Authority in governance terms and a Strategic Authority in its functional role, can act as a strategic partner, investor, commissioner and convener across policy portfolios. The two unitary authorities retain critical roles in local cultural services, assets, planning and place leadership.

There is also an opportunity to establish a countywide mechanism through which the cultural sector can develop and articulate a shared strategic voice. This could bring cultural organisations and networks together with the Combined Authority, unitary authorities and wider partners to support joint priority-setting, advocacy, evidence-gathering, cross-sector relationships and collaborative delivery. Any future arrangement should complement existing networks and partnerships rather than duplicate them or create unnecessary additional layers of governance.

The forthcoming Cultural Strategy should clarify the respective roles of the Combined Authority, unitary authorities, any future countywide cultural partnership arrangements, and existing sector networks, with clear mechanisms for collaboration, shared decision-making and accountability.

| Partner | Proposed strategic role |
|---|---|
| **Cumbria Combined Authority** | Cross-portfolio strategic partner; investor/commissioner; convening power; economic, skills, visitor economy and place alignment. |
| **Cumberland and Westmorland & Furness Councils** | Local cultural services and assets; planning and place leadership; community relationships; delivery and local investment. |
| **Countywide Cultural Partnership** | Shared strategic cultural voice; joint advocacy; relationships; priority-setting; evidence and coordination across the system. |
| **Cultural organisations, networks and practitioners** | Delivery, specialist expertise, national and local partnerships, audiences, participation and place-based relationships. |

# 4. A shared proposition for Cumbria

*The case for culture in Cumbria is not that the sector should be supported solely because culture is inherently worthwhile. It is that Cumbria already possesses the significant cultural asset base which is producing outcomes the county wants more of - jobs, visitor spend, skills, wellbeing, belonging, active places and external investment - and there is clear potential to increase that contribution.*

Cumbria's distinctive strength is the combination of nationally significant cultural anchors with a distributed, locally rooted network capable of reaching communities across a dispersed rural geography. Culture acts as connective infrastructure between those scales: between local communities and national opportunity, between visitors and place, between young people and careers, and between cultural activity and wider public outcomes.

The evidence also shows that much of this value is being produced at the limits of current organisational and workforce capacity. The answer is not to describe the sector as fragile, nor to assume that better networking alone will unlock its potential. The strategic task is to strengthen capacity, create paid pathways, protect and use cultural infrastructure, connect culture deliberately to other portfolios and target future growth through better strategy and evidence.

Devolution creates an opportunity to make more strategic use of these assets, but the proposition extends beyond any single institution or authority. Cumbria's growth challenge is shared: increasing productivity and investment; building and retaining the workforce needed by its economy; increasing the value of the visitor economy; and creating thriving places in which people want to live, work and build their futures. Culture already contributes to each of these outcomes.

The immediate opportunity is therefore to recognise, connect and invest in what already works. The longer-term prize is a county in which culture is embedded in economic and place strategy; creative skills contribute to growth across the economy; young people can build sustainable careers without having to leave; visitors encounter more of Cumbria, stay longer and spend more widely; cultural assets animate towns and communities; and Cumbria's cultural identity is recognised nationally and internationally alongside its landscape.

Cumbria does not lack cultural activity, ambition or quality. The opportunity is to turn those strengths into greater value for the county - through capacity, skills, strategy, partnership and targeted investment.

**Recognise - Invest - Connect - Scale - Champion**

*Recognise culture as strategic infrastructure. Invest in the assets, organisations and people already generating value. Connect culture deliberately to skills, health, visitor economy, transport and regeneration. Scale programmes that demonstrate impact. Champion Cumbria's cultural offer nationally and internationally as part of the county's proposition for investment, talent, visitors and quality of life.*

# Appendix A – Methodology and evidence base

*This report draws on primary research, qualitative engagement, published statistics and economic modelling. The accompanying Technical Annex contains the full synthesis and is the master source for the survey evidence used in this redraft.*

| Evidence strand | Use in the report |
|---|---|
| **Cultural Organisations Survey** | 42 responses from organisations across Cumbria, covering scale, finances, audiences, infrastructure, partnerships and outcomes. |
| **Independent Creatives and Micro-Businesses Survey** | 35 responses from freelancers, artists, makers and small creative businesses, including income, geography, infrastructure and collaboration. |
| **Business Community Survey** | A short Mentimeter poll distributed through the Combined Authority, BEC business cluster and Steering Group networks. Up to 14 responses; treated as a qualitative snapshot rather than representative survey evidence. |
| **Roundtables and stakeholder engagement** | Three facilitated roundtables with six breakout conversations and more than 20 participants, alongside targeted stakeholder discussions. |
| **Published data and desk research** | ONS Business Counts, BRES, regional/sub-regional GVA, Census, DCMS Participation Survey, Arts Council England, National Lottery Heritage Fund, 360Giving and comparator data. |
| **Economic modelling** | Genecon modelling of visitor activity and the wider Cumbrian economy, including culture-associated visitor spend, input-output effects and creative-employment estimates. |

## How this report defines culture

For the purposes of this report, culture is used as an umbrella term for Cumbria's wider cultural ecology: the organisations, practitioners, venues, festivals, heritage activity, cultural learning and community-led creative activity that produce, present, preserve or enable cultural experiences. This includes formal institutions and businesses alongside freelancers, artists and makers, voluntary and community organisations, networks and informal activity.

No single statistical classification captures this whole ecology. The report therefore uses different, but related, operational definitions according to the evidence being analysed:

- Cultural sector / cultural ecology refers to the broad practice-based definition used through the surveys, engagement and cultural mapping. It encompasses arts and cultural organisations, museums and heritage, festivals and events, performing and visual arts, literature, film, craft and making, cultural education, participatory and community-led activity, together with the practitioners, venues and networks that enable that activity.
- Arts, entertainment and recreation sector is the statistical definition used for the report's headline measures of direct GVA and employment. These figures draw on ONS GVA and BRES data for the arts, entertainment and recreation industries, providing a consistent basis for comparison with other places. This is a broader economic category than culture alone, encompassing recreational activity as well as core cultural activity, and should therefore be understood as a proxy for the wider sector rather than a precise measure of cultural organisations alone.
- Creative industries are treated as a related but wider economic grouping and are defined using the DCMS creative-industries classification applied to ONS Business Counts and BRES data. This includes sectors such as IT and software, architecture, advertising and marketing, film, TV and photography, publishing, museums and galleries, and music, performing and visual arts. The report therefore distinguishes the cultural ecology from the wider creative-industries economy: they overlap, but are not interchangeable.

- **Creative employment / the creative economy** refers to people working in creative occupations wherever they are employed, including outside the creative industries. The report uses the DCMS creative-occupations classification, based on SOC codes, together with the Nesta creative-intensity methodology to estimate the presence of creative skills across Cumbria's wider economy. These figures are modelled estimates rather than direct employment counts and are deliberately broader than employment within cultural or creative-industry businesses.
- **Culture-associated visitor activity is defined differently again**. It estimates the share of Cumbria's visitor activity associated with or motivated by arts, culture and heritage, and then models the spending and economic activity generated through sectors including accommodation, food and drink, retail and transport. It therefore captures culture's role as a driver of wider economic activity rather than defining those businesses themselves as cultural. These impacts overlap with some direct sector activity and should not be added to direct GVA to create a single cultural-economy total.

### How to read the numbers

Direct sector GVA and employment refer to the arts, entertainment and recreation industries using ONS datasets. Direct GVA uses ONS Regional Gross Value Added (balanced) by industry, at current prices; 2024 figures are provisional. Arts, entertainment and recreation is defined as SIC divisions 90–93 and is used as a consistent statistical proxy for comparative analysis. This category is broader than the cultural ecology described elsewhere in this report. For county-level comparisons, Cumbria is calculated as Cumberland plus Westmorland & Furness.

Creative-industries figures use the DCMS creative-industries classification. Creative-employment estimates capture people working in creative occupations across the whole economy and are modelled rather than direct headcounts.

Visitor-economy modelling estimates spend associated with arts, culture and heritage activity and its wider effect through local supply chains and household spending. It captures some of the same activity as the direct sector figures and should not be added to direct GVA to produce a single total.

Survey financial, workforce and engagement totals are aggregated from self-reported responses and should be read as indicative rather than as a census of the whole sector. Percentages use the number of respondents answering each question, which varies slightly across questions.

The business survey has a small response base and is used qualitatively to illustrate perspectives from outside the cultural sector, not as statistically representative evidence.

### A note on the cultural map

The working register in the Technical Annex identifies 78 cultural organisations, venues and networks and 24 festivals and events. It is a foundation for future cultural infrastructure planning rather than a definitive census. A future Cultural Infrastructure Framework should test and enrich this register with information on scale, condition, reach, accessibility, ownership, investment need and strategic role.

# Appendix B – Key external research references


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Office for National Statistics (2026), Regional gross value added (balanced) by industry: local authorities by ITL1 region, 1998–2024. 2024 provisional estimates, current prices. Released 23 September 2026.

Office for National Statistics, UK Business Counts; Business Register and Employment Survey; Regional and sub-regional Gross Value Added (balanced); Census 2021.

DCMS Participation Survey 2023/24 and 2024/25; DCMS Creative Careers Research (2025); DCMS Economic Estimates.

Artsmark (August 2026), Current Artsmark Settings register; Cumbria Careers Hub, local pupil-preference analysis and published labour-market-information resources; local FE and post-16 provider data supplied to the study.

Cumbria Tourism (2025), STEAM Tourism Volume and Value / Cumbria Visitor Survey.

Arts Council England funding data; National Lottery Heritage Fund grants; 360Giving / GrantNav.

Genecon (2026), culture-associated visitor-spend analysis and Cumbria input-output modelling; DCMS creative-industries classification applied to ONS UK Business Counts and BRES; creative-employment analysis.

Bakhshi, H., Freeman, A. and Higgs, P. (2013), A Dynamic Mapping of the UK's Creative Industries, Nesta.

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We would like to thank the cultural organisations, creative practitioners, freelancers and micro-businesses who contributed to this research through surveys, roundtables and discussions.

Their insights, experience and evidence have been invaluable in shaping this report, helping to build a richer understanding of Cumbria's cultural sector and the many ways it supports communities, wellbeing, place identity, skills development, the visitor economy and inclusive growth across the county.

### Cultural Organisations and Venues

Art Gene Limited
Artwork Arts4All CIC
BarrowFull
BlueJam Arts CIC
Cumbria Arts & Culture Network (CACN)
Drum and Brass
Everywhere Everything Everyone CIC
Full of Noises
Grizedale Arts
Hawkshead Grammar School Museum
Highlights Rural Touring
Kendal Brewery Arts
Kendal Calling
Kendal Mountain Events Ltd
Kendal Parish Church
Keswick Museum
Kirkgate Arts and Heritage
Lakeland Arts
Lake District Music
Lake District Book Festival
Lakes Arts Festivals / LICAF Foundation
Land & Sky Media
Laurel and Hardy Museum
Millom and District Local History Society
Multicultural Cumbria
OCG Arts Ltd t/a Old Courthouse Gallery
Penrith and Eden Museum
Penrith Players
Potfest
Rosehill Arts Trust Limited
Signal Film and Media
South Cumbria Musical Festival
Tullie
The Ashton Group Theatre / Theatre Factory
The Dock Museum
The Knotted Project
The Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway Preservation Society Trust
Theatre by the Lake
Workington Transport Heritage Trust
Wordsworth Grasmere (The Wordsworth Trust)
Zwiebelfish CIC

### Creative Practitioners, Freelancers and Micro-businesses

Baines, C.
Birkett, T.
Bowyer, M.
Camlin, D.
Cartwright-Smith, S.
Coulthard, C.
D'Agorne Craghill, A.
Dunphy, R.
Ensoll, R.
Gadella, M.
Galloway-Smith, R.
Grant, A.
Handpicked Productions
Haley, D.
Harris, L.
Johnston, T.
Lavender, K.
Low, M.
Marcangelo, C.
McGordon, E.
Minden, S.
Morgan, A.
Pedler, I.
Skinner, B.
Speight, T.
Staps, C.
Staunton, S. A.
Stevenson, V.
Story, A.
Tate, S.
Timpson, A.