



# **Black Country Culture Temperature Test Summary Report**

**August 2021**

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## Introduction

Creative Black Country (CBC) works with communities in Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton to explore and develop new creative projects with local people in the places where they live. Our core aim is to encourage people in the Black Country to take part in more cultural activity. CBC is an action learning project funded by Arts Council England through the [Creative People and Places](#) (CPP) programme to engage audiences in areas where evidence shows people are less likely to take part in publicly funded arts and culture.

Creative excellence and innovation are key to CBC's work; we want to encourage communities to get involved in our projects through a range of commission opportunities, co-creation of work and embedding that work in people and place while ensuring a quality experience for all involved.

In July 2021, CBC ran a temperature test exercise through an online survey to gain insights into how the cultural sector in the Black Country coped with the Covid-19 pandemic over the past year. The information gathered also tried to identify how the sector is currently responding to the lifting of restrictions and plans for the future, as well as views on areas for governmental actions and support.

[Earthen Lamp](#) was commissioned to analyse the information collected from the sector and draw clear and actionable insights. In total, 43 online surveys were completed. The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix I. The data was analysed thematically, highlighting common topics and areas of interest.

## What we learnt from the temperature test

There was a Black Country strength and resilience which came through and kept local communities connected, continuing to raise aspirations and made the most of what we already have in the Black Country. During the Pandemic organisations also stayed committed to working with local people in the Black Country enabling communities to thrive, be it through resourced opportunities, solution-based thinking or creative practice.

Uncertainty returns repeatedly as the main concern of the sector. These relates to uncertainty over the ability to plan for the future, funding viability, ongoing Covid-restrictions, the maintenance and development of the cultural sector, the willingness of participants to engage, and whether government policies or initiatives will support the cultural sector.

Overall, respondents stressed the importance of clear guidance from the government going forward into the period after the pandemic.

Individuals and organisations are calling for stability in numerous forms. Calls have been made for funding to maintain creative practice and develop it post-pandemic. Additionally, respondents hope for the public to be willing to participate in cultural activities post-pandemic. With regard to the pandemic, many referred to the challenges related to long term planning faced by restrictions changing and the lack of availability of suitable insurance options.

The information provided through this consultation highlighted the key role played by arts organisations in society, and more specifically by cultural venues as important spaces of connection for communities arguing that venues should be funded and supported appropriately.

A few areas of action were highlighted for Creative Black Country and related networking and development organisations to implement. Requests were made to help rebuild the public's engagement with the arts and ways to increase public confidence and willingness to attend cultural activities and improve attitudes towards the value of arts. Respondents also asked for more community building activities. Creative Black Country and other organisation may be able to facilitate more community building as part of the pandemic recovery.

Trying to gauge the emotions expressed through the information we can summarise that the emotion is anxious, and mood is primarily cautious. There is some level of pride in having survived the last few months in spite of all the uncertainties and issues faced by this sector.

## Insights derived from the information

### Participants

The temperature test online survey received responses from a variety of different organisation types and sizes (see Appendix I for a more detailed breakdown).

Half of the people who participated in the survey identified as freelancer and/or artists and over a third were arts organisations. This mixed makeup of respondents allows insights into the current situation of the cultural sector in the Black Country from various perspectives.

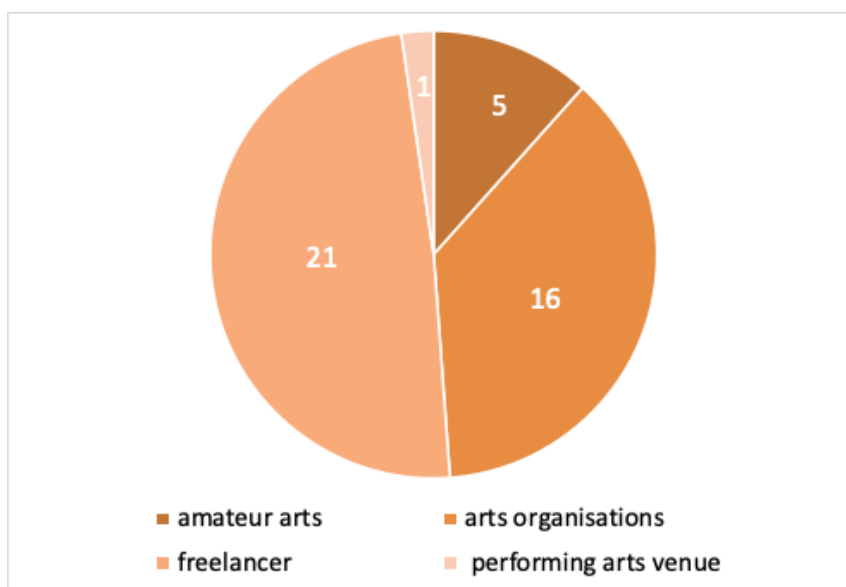


Figure 1 Overview of respondents by organisation type

### Lockdown activities and governmental support

The majority of respondents tried to keep their activities and services going during the pandemic, using alternative (mostly digital) formats. The respondent experiences were mixed and of varied degrees of success: some were able to diversify their programmes and reach new audiences, others encountered difficulties both within their own workforce and with audiences. In a first response, organisations reacted with adapting their activities to new (often digital) ways of delivering when they encountered challenges due to restricted access to audiences (e.g. schools). Whereas the respondents reflected positively on these actions that allowed them to keep going during the lock, the overarching theme were continuous concerns about the unsteadiness of the financial situation and the reliance on multiple funders and ongoing application processes for often small pots of funding.

From a financial perspective, there was a marked difference between larger organisations and venues on the one hand and smaller organisations, businesses, and freelancers on the other. The former was, in most cases, able to secure financial support from the government. The latter received very little, if any, government support (except for some freelancers who qualified for the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)). This put the survival of some organisations into question and had a significant impact on the livelihoods of several individuals.

### Larger arts organisations and venues

Subsidised arts organisations received financial support from the government including through the Arts Council Emergency Fund, the Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF), furlough, and existing long-term funding as well as commissions. They were able to continue to deliver activities in new digital formats and, more recently, some in-person performances and workshops. This brought some positive consequences relating to diversifying their offer and reaching existing and new partners and audiences. However, these organisations also found it extremely difficult to plan activities around continuously shifting guidelines, which led to some reluctance to engage with their partners.

The representative of the large-scale independent theatre reported similar experiences: the venue was supported through the Cultural Recovery Fund and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (the latter proved particularly valuable) and access other funding through local authority issued business support and lockdown disruption packages. Some of the communication around the CRF was very last-minute, but overall it was fairly straightforward to access and proved essential to the venue's survival.

### Smaller arts organisations and venues

All four community-focused organisations have continued to deliver services online or in person, but socially distanced, throughout the pandemic. One received two rounds of Cultural Recovery Funding, which proved essential to sustain their activity but involved issues around lack of clear communication and organisations from funders. Another charity, which specialises in delivering creative activities for elders and carers, lost most of their funding because their main funder was adversely affected by Covid-19 and became unable to support the charity's core work. Another organisation did not succeed in securing financial support from the government or local authorities, despite having contributed to impact assessments carried out by Public Health around equality in the past.

The two venue-based organisations had very different pandemic experiences. One was able to adapt some of its existing well-being and mutual aid activities to the Covid-19 emergency, which enabled them to partner with the local public health team and receive grants and longer-term funding. The other is a multi-arts cultural venue with a particular focus on film had to close in March 2020 and re-opened in June 2021. They received some support through furlough, local government grants, and the BFI. They were not successful in their application for a Sustainability Grant but were especially disappointed at having to wait for five months to receive the final decision - this was a source of considerable stress and anxiety.

None of the five organisations and businesses providing professional services and products received Covid relief funding from the government. All have continued to deliver services and products, and some have found alternative ways of generating income; this has proven easier for those already working from home but more difficult for those who usually work on live events or whose activities depend on venues being open.

### Artists and freelancers

Throughout the lockdown period, almost everyone stated the usual activities could not take place, but most of the artists and freelancers who completed the survey were able to transition some of their activities to digital platforms. This had some advantages, mostly to do with increased accessibility and reach for their work for some audience members; but also some disadvantages relating to lack of experience with digital platforms on the part of both artists and audiences. Respondents were also conscious that, while online platforms are making their work more accessible to certain audiences, they are precluding others from engaging.

Three of the individual artists or freelancers who completed the survey mentioned that they received financial support through SEISS. This was a much-needed lifeline:

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*"My turnover has gone from £40,000 in 2019/2020 to £576 in 2020/21 so the grants have been invaluable."*

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Many who were forced to cancel or indefinitely postpone their projects felt a sense of isolation and stagnation. Several of the usual opportunities for development and community-building became inaccessible too.

Respondents reported that, despite being freelancers, they did not qualify for the SEISS, e.g. they did not fulfil the example two years criterion. Respondents supported themselves by applying for commissions and diversifying their activities. One respondent noted that increased competition for grants and opportunities resulted in a lower rate of successful applications than usual. Moreover, the size of the grants available and the lack of support from funders and the sector as a whole have been a source of precarity and anxiety:

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*"It's been challenging and there's been a need to be very proactive to find out about and apply for various funding support... I've felt very isolated with little support or guidance from funders or larger organisations."*

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Respondents were also concerned by the lack of investment and public regard for the arts that they witnessed throughout the pandemic, and which they fear might have a trickle-down effect on the sector in the future.

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*"There is such a huge focus on the 'catch up agenda' that is focusing on very narrow experiences and expectations that I worry about this generation's zero experience of school, art and creativity that will never be caught up with this government's narrow agenda."*

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### Amateur Arts Organisations

The five amateur arts organisations whose representatives responded to the survey did not receive any financial support directly from the government. One of the community-based groups delivered some activity which was supported by a local Creative People and Places (ACE) project. The others managed to generate some income through membership subscriptions, commissions, workshops, and similar streams.

### Transitioning out of lockdown

The survey asked about the current situation respondents find themselves in and how they manage their transition out of lockdown. About half of the respondents reported that they or their organisations had started delivering in-person activities again, while the other half had not transitioned out of lockdown yet. Respondents in both groups reported that they continue to deliver activities digitally, and many intend to do so at least for the near future; this was often explained with reference to accessibility for those who cannot attend in-person events.

The most frequently mentioned worries among both groups had to do with uncertainties around Covid-related guidelines, funding and financial support opportunities, and hesitance on the part of partners and audiences to commit to in-person activities. For some respondents, these issues have implications for the survival of their organisations and their careers as a whole.

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*“For me, this period has been worse than the first lockdown in March 2020. At that point we knew the world had stopped and all work was obviously cancelled. Now I am working on projects that I am unsure will happen or not. I am feeling demotivated and very sad”.*

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There was also a mention, that they are not sure whether lifting most restrictions is safe at this stage and that they do not yet feel comfortable resuming their usual activities without Covid-related precautions. Five explicitly reported that they intend to keep safety measures in place at their in-person events at least for the time being.

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*“The transition has been confusing - there is a lot of hesitancy and mixed messages from government”.*

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Many pointed out that clinically vulnerable people deserve special attention: artists and professionals are at risk of being excluded from opportunities, and audience members and users could similarly be precluded from experiencing the services and work curated by artists, cultural venues, and other organisations.

### Looking ahead: areas for action and governmental support

The survey asked respondents about their perceived threats and pressure points in terms of their future development and sustainability. Furthermore, they were invited to share their thoughts on necessary governmental actions to help ensure we have thriving arts and cultural sector in the future.

#### Governance and Government

Respondents commented that, as practitioners in the cultural sector, they felt ignored by the government, noting national policies and decisions as examples. Respondents frequently called for support from the government in a broad sense, but also explicitly called for the government to understand the benefits of arts and funding. Some noted that funding was required to support the development of arts practice following a year of pandemic-enforced closure. In general, respondents called for the government to provide support to stabilise and develop the cultural sector in its pandemic recovery.

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*“Govt needs to provide stability - ability to get back on its feet - raise profile and status of creative sector alongside sectors such as sport which receives far more coverage. Govt to back and understand the benefits of creativity for everyone as part of their daily lives.”*

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## Funding and income

Maintaining income was a common concern for respondents, who feared budget cuts closing organisations. Some noted that funding options were limited; for example, a response indicated that they could find project funding but not support for their overhead costs. The work required to apply for several small amounts of funding was mentioned as a struggle for one respondent, while another noted that Creative Black Country funding was low. Some respondents noted that costs for running and developing their practice required supporting funding, with suggestions for funding to support training capacity, and a note that increased running costs are stretching budgets agreed pre-pandemic.

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*“Losing funding is our main threat, we have been struggling with many small amounts of funding, which require a huge amount of unpaid planning and hoop jumping for applications that may not even be successful. “*

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## Sustainability of Arts Practice

Sustaining arts practices on a long-term basis was a concern for many. There were comments about viability and stability of their practice which was a concern, with some noting that practitioners had left the cultural sector during the pandemic. One respondent worried that their projects would have to "fill the gaps for people's needs" and change in focus in line with requirements.

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*“There needs to be more thought around longer term support (not just 3 year) - there is too much short-termism in UK arts funding across all networks.”*

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## Value of Arts

Respondents often commented on the values and functions they perceived in the cultural sector. Although some claimed that cultural activity is a key element of human experience and society, a common claim was that cultural activity was beneficial to mental health. This claim was generally made in relation to the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on isolation and mental health.

## Covid-Restrictions

Covid-19 restrictions, rather than the virus itself, were of concern. Respondents noted that self-isolation and venue closure requirements left businesses in financial insecurity. Some were frustrated that self-isolation requirements forced activities to close even if staff did not have Covid-19. Similarly, changes to restrictions left some respondents concerned that their activities may be forced to close. Covid-19 concerns have also influenced participants at these activities; uncertainty surrounding participant willingness to attend affects ticket sale predictions and the viability of activities which would normally attract currently hesitant audiences.

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*“The only government support which would help us would be some sort of “covid insurance” so that we could plan an event in a year’s time knowing that if the rules about meeting together changed at the last minute, we could get back money we had had to pay in advance.”*

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### Training, Education and Young People

The role of arts activity in education was a significant concern. In many cases, respondents condemned that government cuts to arts activity in schools and higher education, some noting that arts careers were varied. In addition, some respondents commented on access to the arts for young people, either noting that school bookings for productions had diminished or that access to arts activity was valuable for personal growth and life experience.

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*“The ongoing disruption to schools has resulted in a significant reduction in advance bookings for productions either targeted at, or traditionally popular with, schools.”*

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*“Long term - investment in the arts and education around what arts is - its place in a real society where we need graphics, films, games, music and a more creative way of delivering everything from education to health.”*

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### Anticipating an uncertain future

Respondents reflected on the future prospects of their main work or activities. While over half of respondents (23 out of 43) felt optimistic, two out of five respondents are not sure how they felt about the future.

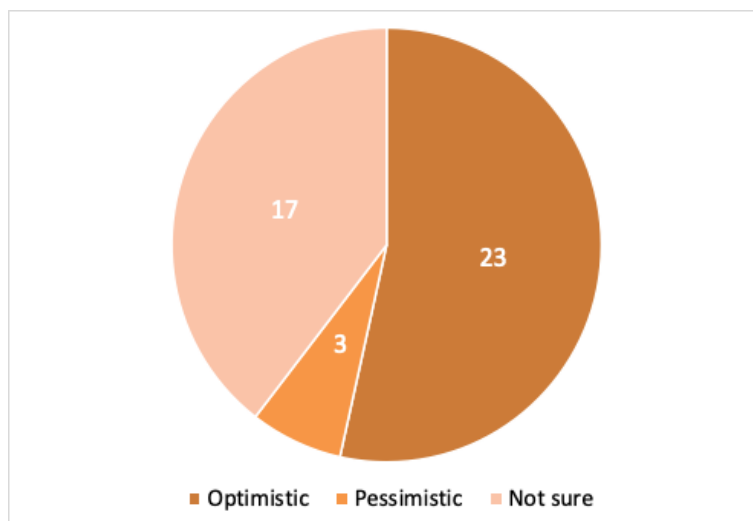


Figure 2 How do you feel about the prospects for your main work/ activities in the future?

## Uncertainty

Respondents frequently expressed uncertainty about the future, particularly noting that this uncertainty makes planning future activities difficult. Uncertainty seems to be especially significant with relation to funding; respondents noted concerns about their organisations closing and issues around personal commitments such as house payments. In general, there appears to be a perception that the cultural sector could be irrevocably damaged.

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*“We can never be sure of funding and for this reason everything feels extremely uncertain.”*

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## Flexibility and ability to adapt

In general, respondents noted that they had to be resilient and adapt their practice to the contemporary context, with some citing ongoing changes and budget cuts in the arts as examples of contexts requiring resilience. Some individuals and small organisations noted that they were able to be flexible, although no respondent noted that they were from a large organisation and particularly able to adapt.

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*“I think individuals in the arts and cultural sectors have always been resilient and creative enough to make things happen regardless of government support because let’s face it the arts have been losing funding for years. This pattern of collective collaboration and community-driven activity will continue regardless, so I am optimistic that the arts will struggle through.”*

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## Value of Arts

Many commented that Covid-19 restrictions had encouraged them or others to reflect on their appreciation for and value of arts. Two respondents noted the importance of their activity in benefiting participants' mental wellbeing.

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*“I also think that people have seen the value of art and culture during lockdown and that they will continue to support this sector whatever happens going forward.”*

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## Governance and Government

Comments regarding the government were varied, but generally indicated uncertainty regarding leadership with regard to Covid-19 and the cultural sector. Respondents seemed unsure about the future direction posed by the government.

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*“Optimistic as I’ve always stayed flexible. Pessimism comes to mind when I look ahead at an incredibly inconsistent leadership, because Covid flexibility has proved positive but expensive.”*

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### Funding

As with respondents concerned about uncertainty in general, some respondents were particularly concerned about the unclear possibilities for upcoming funding.

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*“We can never be sure of funding and for this reason everything feels extremely uncertain.”*

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### Skill Building

A very small number of respondents made comments about skill building in the cultural sector. One comment acknowledges that losses in personnel in the sector may result in a significant training requirement. The other comment notes that Cultural Recovery Funding has supported training to sustain their practice.

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*“We have lost a lot of great people who have had to leave the sector. We may be left with a lot of inexperience and need to upskill quickly.”*

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## Future consideration: Survival and growth

Several aspects were identified as critical for their survival and growth in the future.

### Funding

Funding was the single most numerous requirement for respondents. Several respondents noted that funding arrangements should be medium and long term and available to organisations of different sizes. Some commented that funding to help their practice stabilise and develop would support their overhead costs. Other responses were varied but included a call for advertising revenue to return as a stable prospect and more general calls for money and employment.

### Sustainability of Arts Practice

There was a call for support or behaviours which would sustain the cultural sector. Some of these were material, such as studios, workshops, and hardware. Maintaining jobs, venues, and entry points to the cultural sector were other interests from respondents.

### Governmental Support

As with other questions, many commented on government support for the arts and their needs from local and national government. Some were concerned about government attitudes towards the arts and potential funding cuts post-pandemic. Others noted more general support and funding, indicating a desire for recognition and stability in the cultural sector.

### Public Engagement with Arts

Public attitudes towards cultural activity, and willingness to spend money in the local cultural sector, were of concern to several respondents. Public willingness to spend money on local cultural sector work on an ongoing basis was something which these respondents seemed to be hopeful of. In addition to public spending, respondents hoped that they would be able to continue attracting local employment opportunities.

### Community

Respondents often noted the importance of connections and community in their survival and growth. This was particularly in relation to discussion and understanding and supporting one another through the development of projects. It appears that contact with other people to learn and work together is of special interest to those working in the cultural sector.

### Covid-19

Covid-19 was mentioned; in general, mentions tended to be concerned with carrying out arts activity safely and with permission. Responses which referred to Covid-19 and restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus tended to fall into two categories: restrictions on arts activity and ensuring the safety of those involved in arts activity.

## Appendix I: Survey questions

1. Very brief description of you/ your organisation: are you an artist, performer, venue, NPO, community group, etc.? What are your main activities and cultural offer?
2. The Covid-Pandemic: What's been your experience of keeping your activities and services going during the pandemic? What type of lockdown support have you had from the government (e.g. grants, furlough, etc..) – and what were the positives/ negatives of this?
3. How are things now? How are you managing now with the transition out of lockdown?
4. Looking ahead: Where are your threats or pressure points in terms of your future development and sustainability? What support, if any, would you like the government to provide you with now? Where do you think government needs to act to help ensure we have thriving arts and cultural sector in the future?
5. How do you feel about the prospects for your main work/ activities in the future?
6. Can you sum up in one sentence what is most critical for your survival and growth in the future?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

## Appendix II: Participating organisations

### Amateur arts

- 2 amateur music groups (choir/voice ensemble)
- 2 community groups
- 1 poetry collective

### Arts organisations

- 5 organisations providing professional services in producing, consultancy, PR, marketing, heritage tours; or products such as books and craft objects
- 3 community-focused organisations organising activities, workshops and projects around arts, wellbeing, health, community cohesion (+ 1 who listed themselves as artist but mostly responded in their capacity as manager of arts charity for elderly people and carers)
- 4 representatives of local subsidised arts organisations - a visual arts gallery, a dance organisation, a CPP project
- 2 venue-based organisations, a cinema, and a community hub
- 1 representative of local authority
- 1 community radio

### Freelancers/artists self-description (note: people with several roles)

- 2 performers
- 4 people delivering participatory activities including workshops, early years education, health, wellbeing, and employment services
- 5 artists
- 3 poets
- 4 writers
- 3 people working in film, TV, and media
- 2 people working in music-related roles (musicians, composers, directors)
- Other: community development worker, blogger and community photographer, creative arts student

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