

Creativity. Community. Culture.



Celebrating the impact of UKSPF in Sunderland

Over the past three years, creative organisations across Sunderland have used UK Shared Prosperity Fund investment to deliver ambitious, community-led projects that are transforming neighbourhoods and inspiring pride of place.

This publication celebrates the successes of the project, highlighting the creative activity, partnerships and impact made possible throughout its delivery. It also looks ahead, setting plans for continued development and how its successes can be built upon in the future.

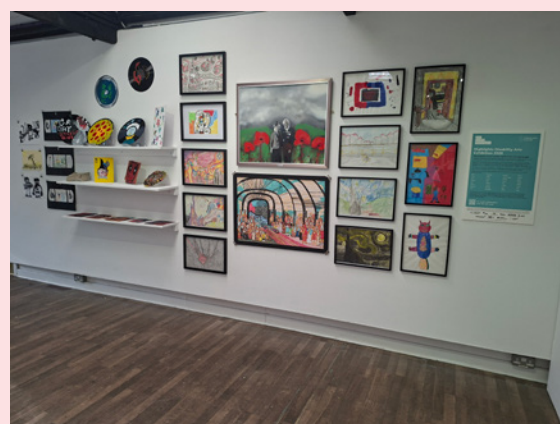


Opening note from Leanne Littlewood

**Director of Culture House Sunderland & Head of Cultural Services,
Sunderland City Council**

The Connecting and Catalysing our Culture, Creativity and Engagement Programme (CCCCEP) UKSPF Partnership was established with a shared ambition: to strengthen the cultural and creative ecosystem across Sunderland by connecting organisations, supporting innovation, developing skills and creating new opportunities for communities and creative practitioners. What began as a programme of collaborative activity has evolved into a strong and supportive network, bringing together partners with a common commitment to inclusive growth and cultural development.

Throughout the project, partners have worked collectively to expand participation, build organisational capacity, support creative talent and deliver meaningful engagement across diverse communities. The strength of the partnership has been reflected not only in the scale and reach of the activity delivered, but also in the relationships, knowledge exchange and shared learning that have emerged along the way.



Since 2014, The Cultural Spring has worked across South Tyneside and Sunderland in collaboration with inspiring local, regional and national artists to bring high-quality cultural activity into local communities.

Project Highlights:

The A Space to Create exhibition was a major highlight of the project – it was a culmination of all the work the venues had done with their local communities, drawing together a vibrant collection of co-created artwork.

One of our key aims as an organisation is to make creative activity accessible to local people in Sunderland, and the A Space to Create exhibition at Arts Centre Washington showed how fantastically creative, imaginative, unique and collaborative Sunderland is. As well as this, it showed how communities that are supported to experiment, collaborate, develop skills, and embrace their creativity can produce truly beautiful and inspiring artwork.

Every venue we worked with produced valuable work and opportunities for local people, including powerful pieces like Sunderland Headlight's film, Any One of Us. Service users at Sunderland Headlight worked with artist Scott Tyrell to devise, write, and storyboard an animation telling the story of Headlight's work from the point of view of a service user approaching the organisation for the first time. The piece was not only beautiful visually and conceptually, but it told a vital story about the importance of mental health provision. The film was shown at a sharing event in Grindon to participants, staff, and partners, and it was incredibly powerful to see the pride and confidence the group displayed in presenting their work. The film was nominated for a Smiley Award and won a Bronze for the People's Choice Award 2026.

We're also very proud of the work ICOS (International Community Organisation of Sunderland) have done to embed creativity into their offer, with the establishment of the Pieroginie Collective – a group of women of Eastern European heritage brought together through workshops with artist Sabina Sallis.



Beyond the Project

We facilitated discussions with the A Space to Create partners to explore the project's legacy and transition towards independence from Cultural Spring. Partners worked with consultant Tina Redford to define their next steps – including discussions about collaborative and individual fundraising, sustainability and resource sharing.

The A Space to Create project has represented a major part of our work as an organisation. We are committed to striving towards overall aim of building capacity for community venues and organisations to deliver creative activities as part of their regular programmes for local residents.

The success of this project has shown that this work delivers real change and positive impact to people living in Sunderland, and we're now working to ensure our existing A Space to Create venues are supported into more independent delivery outside of the project, while putting plans in motion to expand A Space to Create into South Tyneside, too.

The project has created a network of community venues and organisations across Sunderland that regularly share experiences, resources, and expertise, helping each other to continue delivering important creative and cultural opportunities to Sunderland residents. As we move forward, we hope this network will support and nourish new A Space to Create organisations, too, creating a partnership focussed community arts eco-system at grassroots level.

Find out more: theculturalspring.org

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📘 @theculturalspring

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Photo credit: Courtesy of The Cultural Spring



Sunderland
Heritage
Partnership

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The Sunderland Heritage Partnership brings together more than 30 organisations, venues, societies and individuals to raise the profile of Sunderland as a heritage destination.

Project Highlights

We have established a popular website to represent the partnership and celebrate incredible heritage projects and achievements. The website catalogues the work that has been undertaken to bring the partnership closer together in the past three years and gives the partnership a real sense of identity. Since the website launch in early 2025, it has advanced steadily in web visibility – it stands now as a trusted resource for heritage information in Sunderland and a key signpost promoting the various organisations of the Heritage Partnership.

In the period of UKSPF funding, the partnership has also delivered several large-scale heritage celebrations in the form of #LoveSunderlandHeritage festival and the Sunderland Summer Heritage festival in 2025. For these festivals, printed brochures and promotion through the Heritage Partnership website have helped spread the word about the organisation and advertised nearly 100 individual events in total.

Similarly, the Digital Heritage project has undertaken promotion via brochures and posters of Heritage Open Days festivals each September for the partnership organisations. Event highlights include two collaborations with Sunderland College's Travel and Tourism and Business Management students: the Digital Heritage project celebration event in March 2025 hosted over 100 guests and a panel discussion on the future of heritage in Sunderland, and the 'Secrets and Shadows' dark tourism event was delivered for Bright Lights Youth Arts festival at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens in February 2026.



Continuing the Journey

Since the beginning of the CCCCEP Digital Heritage Project in 2023, the Sunderland Heritage Partnership has grown from a small group of around 15 attendees to a bustling collective representing around 25 venues, societies and interested individuals from across Sunderland.

The Heritage Partnership is currently unconstituted, but efforts have been made across the funding period, in line with the collective efforts to create the Heritage Partnership website, to investigate a suitable organisational structure to take the collective forward. The partnership is moving to a new meeting schedule in late 2026, with full meetings every two months, alternating with 'steering group' meetings in the intervening months to help drive the group towards a formal constitution.

The Heritage Partnership Officer, Tom Furness, has begun a role within the Collections team at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens, with a remit for community research and co-creation, that makes possible some continuity of the Heritage Partnership organisation. They are working closely with the partnership steering group to ensure the best possible outcome.

Training sessions were provided for core partnership organisations in the use of the group website, enabling partners to make updates and changes to the website. It is also anticipated that collaborations with Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens – whose 'Object of the Month' series on the website has proven some of its most popular content – will continue.

Find out more: sunderlandheritage.org

Photo credit: Courtesy of Sunderland Heritage Partnership



Culture House Sunderland delivers a vibrant programme of events and activities across our libraries to reduce isolation and build community through creativity.

Project Highlights

Over the past few years, Culture House Sunderland created welcoming, creative and social spaces for people of all ages across our library network.

A major milestone was the opening of Culture House Sunderland in September 2026 and the launch of Our Home in Space, bringing together international artists and local astronomer Dan Monk to create an immersive exploration of our place in the universe. The exhibition has attracted more than 48,000 visitors, establishing Culture House as a major cultural destination and providing audiences with inspiring opportunities to engage with science, creativity and discovery.

Another standout achievement was the delivery of the Schools Festival, which took place across six days during September and engaged hundreds of children and young people. The festival showcased the building's potential as a centre for learning, creativity and aspiration, while creating memorable experiences for schools from across the city.

Innovation and creativity were further demonstrated through Southpaw's delivery of HOME, which used a range of digital technologies to enhance the performance experience and transform spaces within Culture House Sunderland.

The Creative Smart City Symposium brought together artists, technologists and creative practitioners from across the country to share ideas and explore the relationship between culture, innovation and place. The symposium strengthened Sunderland's position within national conversations around creativity and technology while providing valuable opportunities for local audiences and practitioners to learn from leading voices in the sector.

Alongside these flagship events, our school holiday programmes were a real highlight, with families joining us for craft workshops, film screenings, digital art, Claymation, storytelling, author visits, gaming sessions and relaxed drop-ins. These sessions gave children and their grownups the chance to explore creativity together, and it has been great to see how much people valued having these opportunities on their doorstep.

Weekly Rhyme & Shine sessions helped little ones build confidence and communication skills, while giving parents and carers a friendly space to spend time together. Adults attended weekly sessions such as WEAR Friends, Creative Computing, Research Your Family Tree and board-game afternoons. Participants told us how much these sessions mattered, offering space to learn new skills and meet new people.



Looking Ahead

Across the years, we have kept trying out new ideas, testing future programme formats and listening closely to what our communities enjoyed. With the CCCCEP project now complete, we've been reflecting on the scale of activity delivered and the difference it has made to communities across the city.

The learning from this year has shaped the foundations of what comes next. One thing has been clear throughout: people want regular, local, low-cost creative opportunities, and they want spaces where they can learn, connect and feel part of something.

Our weekly early years and older adult sessions will continue, building on the strong attendance and sense of community that has grown across City Library and our Creative Smart City Hubs at Washington and Houghton Libraries. The Early Years and Family Programme builds directly on the success of Rhyme & Shine and our holiday programmes, incorporating storytelling, sensory experiences, films and weekend activities.

For adults, our new programme will carry forward weekly sessions offering more chances to learn and meet others.

Alongside this, the wider programme developments will help shape the future cultural landscape that the new building sits within, strengthening partnerships and deepening citywide engagement.

Find out more: culturehousesunderland.co.uk/events

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Photo credit: Courtesy of Culture House



MINERVA
ARTS & WELLBEING

Minerva Arts & Wellbeing works to deliver inclusive arts programmes that build confidence, reduce isolation and support mental health through creative learning.

Project Highlights

Since joining the CCCCEP partnership, Minerva Arts & Wellbeing has been proud to contribute to a programme that has placed creativity, participation and community at the heart of cultural development across Sunderland.

One of the most significant achievements has been our ability to engage people who may not traditionally access arts and cultural opportunities. Through a diverse programme of creative learning activities, including ceramics, fused glass, textiles and other specialist workshops, we have welcomed participants from a wide range of backgrounds and communities across the city.

Many participants joined us to improve their wellbeing, develop new skills or simply connect with others, and it has been rewarding to see confidence and creativity flourish over time.

The project has enabled us to significantly exceed our original participation targets, demonstrating both the demand for accessible creative opportunities and the value of embedding culture within local communities. Participants consistently reported increased confidence, improved wellbeing and a greater sense of belonging because of taking part.

Partnership working has also been a key highlight. Through collaboration with community organisations, referral partners and cultural stakeholders, we have been able to reach new audiences and ensure activities remain responsive to local needs. These relationships have strengthened our understanding of the communities we serve and created opportunities for participants to continue their creative journeys beyond individual workshops.

Perhaps most importantly, the project has reinforced the power of creativity as a tool for connection. Whether participants attended to learn a new skill, meet new people or improve their wellbeing, the programme created welcoming spaces where individuals could feel valued, supported and inspired.

We are extremely grateful to Sunderland City Council, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the wider CCCCEP partnership for investing in creative opportunities that have made a meaningful difference to people's lives across Sunderland.



Building for the Future

The CCCCEP project has provided a strong foundation for the future development of Minerva Arts & Wellbeing's creative learning programme.

One of the most important legacies is the increased confidence and engagement of participants who have continued to access creative opportunities beyond their initial involvement. Many individuals who first joined through CCCCEP activities have gone on to attend additional workshops, engage with other community programmes and maintain the social connections they developed through participation.

The project has also strengthened our partnerships across Sunderland, creating new relationships and reinforcing existing ones. These connections will continue to support collaborative working, audience development and the delivery of accessible cultural opportunities throughout the city.

The learning gained through the project has helped us better understand local demand for creative activities, particularly specialist arts provision that may otherwise be inaccessible due to cost or availability. This knowledge will directly inform the design and delivery of future programmes.

As an organisation, we remain committed to ensuring that creativity is accessible to everyone, regardless of their circumstances. We will continue to build on the successes of CCCCEP by seeking new funding opportunities, developing partnerships and delivering high-quality creative activities that support wellbeing, lifelong learning and community connection.

The impact of this project will continue long after the funding period has ended through the skills, confidence and relationships that participants have developed.

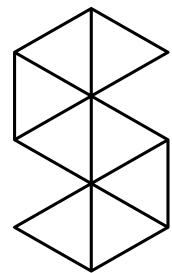
Find out more: minervaartsandwellbeing.com

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Photo credit: Courtesy of Minerva Arts & Wellbeing



SUNDERLAND CULTURE

Sunderland Culture delivers a creative programme of events and participatory activities in communities across Sunderland.

Project Highlights

Taking part in CCCCEP has enabled Sunderland Culture to strengthen our digital infrastructure, including the development of a new website and adapting our systems to support the opening of Culture House. We have improved how we collect and use audience data, helping us understand who we reach, where there are opportunities to engage more communities, and how our cultural programme can benefit Sunderland and the wider region.

Through Green Spaces, Shared Places – part of Art Fund's national Going Places¹ project – young people are putting their own stamp on Sunderland's history, helping to shape how the city's collections are interpreted and shared. Working alongside artists, curators and environmental professionals, they have explored objects from Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens to create a new exhibition. Launched at the National Memorial Arboretum in July, the exhibition will tour across the UK before arriving at Rainton Meadows in Spring 2027. The project introduces new ways to experience Sunderland's collections, connecting the city's history with audiences and collections across the UK, while keeping the museum's stories accessible during its redevelopment.

Through the increased capacity gained through the CCCCEP project, we have developed learning packs, bringing free creative resources beyond cultural venues and into classrooms and homes. We know that cost and access can sometimes make it difficult for schools and families to take part in cultural activities. The lesson plans give teachers, schools and arts educators free, easy-to-use resources that make it easier for more young people to engage with creativity, wherever they are.

Highlights: Disability Arts Exhibition 2026, supported by the Autonomy Project², created more accessible ways for young artists to take part and share their work. Recognising that traditional venues don't work for everyone, the online exhibition gave deaf, disabled and neurodivergent young artists the opportunity to showcase their work digitally and reach new audiences. At Arts Centre Washington, artworks were featured in-person as part of the Bright Lights Youth Arts Festival, alongside SEND-friendly workshops exploring art and animation.

¹ Going Places is an Art Fund programme made possible with major support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and The Julia Rausing Trust, with additional support from a generous group of trusts, foundations and individuals.

² The Autonomy Project was funded by the Association of Independent Museums' (AIM) Connected Communities programme.



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Looking Ahead

Partnership working has demonstrated the value and impact of a combined approach to participation, creating opportunities for communities to engage in a wide range of arts, heritage and wellbeing activities. Through close collaboration with Culture House Sunderland, Cultural Spring, Minerva Arts & Wellbeing and Sunderland Heritage Partnership, we have been able to celebrate successes, share learning and strengthen the impact of community-led activity across the city.

Working alongside partners has provided valuable opportunities to learn from one another and open conversations around approaches. These relationships will help support a sustainable approach to cultural participation beyond the CCCCEP project, ensuring that knowledge, partnerships and opportunities are carried forward.

This collaborative approach has also highlighted the importance of creating city-wide participation opportunities. With the closure of the National Glass Centre and the redevelopment of Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens, we are adapting our approach to What's On guides. These will showcase the breadth of the city-wide cultural offer, as well as bringing together activities and opportunities from Arts Centre Washington, Culture House Sunderland and Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art.

As Culture House Sunderland opens and the redevelopment of Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens progresses, we will continue to explore opportunities for collaboration across the city. Through strengthening partnerships, sharing learning and developing our understanding of how to reach audiences, we can build on learnings from the CCCCEP project and continue developing meaningful opportunities for communities across Sunderland.

Find out more: sunderlandculture.org.uk

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   [@sunderlandculture](https://www.linkedin.com/company/sunderlandculture)



Photo credit: Courtesy of Sunderland Culture



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City Council



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND

Reflections from Dr Phillipa Carter

Independent Project Evaluator

Accessing funding from UKSPF has enabled real breadth and depth of activity for the five partner organisations. In some cases, they have been able to experiment and try new things with new audiences, and for others they could offer more people the opportunity to take part in tried and tested popular activities.

The projects have operated across the whole of the Local Authority area, offering creative opportunities to communities from Seaburn to Silksworth, Hendon to Hetton, Washington to Ryhope and everywhere in between. As well as being geographically diverse, the range of art forms and crafts on offer have been wide ranging, with opportunities to participate in theatre, dance, ceramics, heritage crafts, music and much more.

The activities and events offered have made a real difference to the people of Sunderland, with participants reporting better wellbeing, increased confidence and pride in what they have created.

With five projects working in partnership, one of the most important outcomes of the funding has been the increase in collaboration and collective learning across the organisations and the city. Each project has brought unique benefits for audiences and participants and by working together and sharing learning the five partners have been able to improve their practice and increase benefits for Sunderland residents.

The improved networks and infrastructure created by the project will be a real asset to the sector in the coming years, providing a foundation to build on as the five partners grow and develop. We can't wait to see what comes next!





Celebrating Impact. Shaping Futures.

The Connecting and Catalysing Our Culture, Creativity & Engagement Project is made possible through funding from the UK Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund via Sunderland City Council.

This year the programme has supported hundreds of creative events and community-led activities that help Sunderland's people and places to thrive.

"I've discovered that I am actually quite a creative person! Thanks so much for a great session, I'll definitely be doing it again."

Workshop participant