SUNDERLAND CULTURE

Annual Review
2025-26



Arts Centre Washington

National Glass Centre

Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art

SUNDERLAND MUSEUM & WINTER GARDENS

Culture START

University of Sunderland

MACSunderland Music, Arts and Culture Trust

Sunderland City Council

Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Funded by UK Government

Welcome to the review of Sunderland Culture's activities during 2025-26.

Bringing together some of Wearside's most cherished cultural venues, activities, we work across the city with communities and local partners to ensure the power of art, culture and creativity is harnessed for the benefit of Sunderland, its residents and visitors.

Sunderland Culture was founded by the three main funders of arts provision in the city - Sunderland City Council, University of Sunderland and Sunderland Music, Arts and Culture (MAC) Trust - into a single, independent, and resilient delivery model. We are a not for profit, limited company and registered Charity in England and Wales, funded by Arts Council England through the National Portfolio, and with support from public funding schemes and charitable trusts and foundations.

A WELCOME FROM THE NEW CHAIR OF THE BOARD

It is a privilege to write my first introduction as Chair of Sunderland Culture at such an important and exciting moment for the organisation and for the city.

Over the past year, Sunderland Culture has continued to demonstrate the vital role culture can play in improving lives, strengthening communities and building pride in place. Across our venues and programme, we have welcomed hundreds of thousands of visitors and engaged thousands of participants through ambitious exhibitions, performances, learning activity and community programmes that place culture at the heart of Sunderland's future.

Since joining the organisation, I have been struck by the energy, resilience and commitment of everyone involved in Sunderland Culture. I would particularly like to thank our founding partners — Sunderland City Council, the University of Sunderland and MAC Trust — for the warm welcome they have extended to me and for their continued commitment to driving ambitious change across the city through culture.

Sunderland is a city with a strong sense of identity, creativity and possibility. As we look ahead, I am confident Sunderland Culture will continue to play an important role in shaping that future — bringing people together, championing talent and ensuring culture remains central to the life of the city.

FAREWELL FROM OUR FORMER CHAIR OF THE BOARD

It has been a privilege to serve the city in which I grew up, contributing to a cultural journey that continues to evolve and inspire.

Throughout these past five years, I have witnessed remarkable change and progress, driven by the collective efforts of dedicated partners across the city, not least our founding partners Sunderland City Council, University of Sunderland and Sunderland MAC Trust. Together, we have strengthened Sunderland's cultural identity, fostering creativity and civic pride through ambitious programmes and collaborations.

I extend my sincere thanks to all board members, past and present, for their commitment, expertise, and unwavering support. My gratitude also goes to Arts Council England, and to colleagues including Rebecca Ball, Nick Malyan, and the exceptional team at Sunderland Culture, whose dedication has made this work both impactful and rewarding.

Finally, I wish Tom Billington and the entire organisation every success in the years ahead. Sunderland's cultural future is bright, and I am proud to have played a part in its continuing story.



Image: (left) Tom Billington, Sunderland Culture Chair and (right) Jane Earl, former Sunderland Culture Chair

Theory of Change

Our mission is to improve life for everyone in Sunderland through Culture. This year's annual review shows just a few examples of how we translate creative activity into real-world impact.

Improving life for everyone in Sunderland through culture

- Improving the city's profile and reputation
- Creating connectivity amongst our communities
- Building confidence and aspiration in young people
- Improving health and wellbeing
- Growing our creative economy

Our Aims

- Delivering an excellent and diverse arts and heritage programme
- Encouraging everyone to get involved
- Securing a revitalised and resilient cultural infrastructure

Our assets, audiences, participants and partners

Across our venues, citywide and online:

- National Glass Centre
- Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art
- Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens
- Arts Centre Washington
- Culture Start
- City programme

Growing existing and building new audiences, and opportunities to take part:

- People who live and visit Sunderland

With a particular focus on:

- Children and young people experiencing financial disadvantage
- Artists and creative businesses
- Black, Asian and other ethnically diverse communities
- People with disabilities, autism or additional needs
- Older people

Working with our partners to maximise resources

- Sunderland City Council
- University of Sunderland
- Sunderland MAC Trust
- Creative, cultural and digital sector
- Funders
- Businesses
- Health sector
- Education sector
- Housing sector
- Voluntary and community organisations

A unique model for cultural regeneration

Improving the city's profile and reputation

We present ambitious exhibitions, events and cultural experiences that celebrate Sunderland's creativity, heritage and ambition, strengthening the city's reputation as a vibrant place to live, visit, work and invest.

Exhibitions

From major retrospectives to contemporary commissions and community-led projects, the year's exhibitions demonstrated Sunderland Culture's commitment to making great art accessible to residents and visitors.

National Glass Centre (NGC) presented its final year of exhibitions around a theme of celebration, reflecting on the building's unique contribution to contemporary glass and the artists who have shaped its legacy.

Three Artists brought together work by Anthony Amoako-Attah, a Ghanaian artist who recently completed his PhD at the University of Sunderland, Joanna Manousis, a British artist who at the time of the exhibition was also at the University of Sunderland working her PhD, and Zac Weinberg, an American artist who came to NGC as a Fulbright Scholar. Their work highlighted the global reach of NGC's artistic community, celebrating Sunderland as a place where artists develop innovative practices.

NGC's final exhibition, *The Graduates*, opened in September, showcasing work made here by artists who specialise in working with glass, and artists who work in other media, but have come to us to develop their practice. Featuring 52 selected artists who graduated from the University of Sunderland with a BA (Hons), MA or PhD in glass or ceramics, the exhibition is a tribute to the achievements of the artists who have worked in the building.

Meanwhile at the NGCA, the programme continued to attract national attention. Hetain Patel's collaboration with Artangel - *Come As You Really Are* was a major highlight, bringing together hundreds of handmade objects and personal collections submitted by people across the region with existing artworks and a new film commission by Patel. Alongside *The Caravan Gallery's Sunderland Pride of Place Project* and Newcastle Hospital Charity's *NHS Darkroom Project*, the exhibition celebrated everyday creativity and explored the role of art in improving people's lives. The show reached audiences far beyond Sunderland, featuring in *The Guardian, The Times*, BBC One Show and BBC Front Row.

NGCA also presented *The Ribs Begin to Rise*, the first institutional solo exhibition by Sunderland-born contemporary artist Ro Robertson, supported by the Henry Moore Foundation. Drawing on the River Wear, Sunderland's industrial heritage and the experiences of the 700 female shipbuilders who worked in the city, the exhibition reflected on family history, identity and the materials that shaped the region.

The year also saw the closing of *Sheila Fell: Cumberland on Canvas* at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens (SMWG). The first major retrospective of Fell's work attracted local, regional and national audiences to Sunderland.

Also at SMWG, *Going Back Brockens: Monuments and Rhetoric After the Miners' Strike* brought together artist Narbi Price and writer Mark Hudson to explore memory, resilience and aspiration in mining communities 40 years after the strike. Originally commissioned in County Durham, the project expanded to include three new paintings representing Sunderland and featured original artworks, a sound installation and films by Carl Joyce, connecting regional histories with contemporary artistic practice.

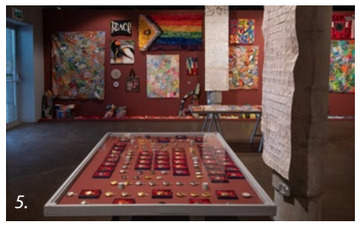
In March 2026, *Rebel Women of Sunderland* opened to coincide with International Women's Day. Initiated in 2019 artist Kathryn Robertson, producer Laura Brewis and writer Jessica Andrews, the project celebrates influential Sunderland women - from activists and industrial pioneers to cultural figures. Expanded through a podcast partnership with the University of Sunderland, the exhibition highlights the women who have shaped the city.


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1. *Save The Last Breath by Zoe Garner, 2025 - part of The Graduates. Photography by David Williams.*
2. *Sunderlover by Shigenobu Fujishiro, 2020. Part of The Graduates exhibition at National Glass Centre.*
3. *Hetain Patel speaking at the Come As You Really Are preview event at Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art. Photography by Colin Davison.*
4. *The Ribs Begin to Rise by Ro Robertson at Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art. Photography by Colin Davison*
5. *Come As You Really Are, Hetain Patel and Artangel at Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art. Photography by Colin Davison.*
6. *Sheila Fell's Cumberland on Canvas at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens. Photography by Colin Davison*
7. *Narbi Price and Mark Hudson's Going Back Brockens at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens. Photography by Colin Davison.*
8. *Public Record at The Fire Station. Photography by Luke Waddington.*

Together, these exhibitions represent a year of ambitious cultural activity that has celebrated Sunderland's creativity while attracting audiences from the region and beyond.

"Amazing. So thought provoking, and the work that went into it... wow"
Visitor, The Graduates

Public Record

Public Record was a landmark production created in partnership with Sunderland Empire and National Theatre as part of the Theatre Nation Partnerships programme. Over a joyous four days at The Fire Station in April 2025, the production brought together a cast of over 100 people, with members of the community and local performance groups sharing the stage with professional musicians from Field Music and The Futureheads. Public Record celebrated Sunderland's identity, creativity and community spirit in the months following the riots of 2024 - serving as a portrait of the city's music, moods and moves the production was also captured as a vinyl record and film. Designed as a blueprint for other places to tell their story, the production has since been announced for a new staging in New York City!

"I can quite honestly say that this has been one of the most memorable and important things I have ever done."
Community Cast Member

"The most life affirming, joyous, uplifting show I've ever seen. I am so proud to be from Sunderland; and this show encapsulated my love for this place."
Audience Member

Award-winning programme

At November's North East Culture Awards *The Ballad of the Crocodile & the Underpass* took home the Heritage Award, a timely accolade for the podcast produced in partnership with Washington Heritage Partnership to celebrate 60 years of Washington New Town. We also celebrated nominations for *Speak Up* (Best Arts & Education Partnership) and *Public Record* (Performance of the Year), a testament to the working partnership between Sunderland Culture, Sunderland Empire and National Theatre. The *Autonomy Project* also received a nomination for the Special Award for Young Achievement.

In December, *Autonomy* was recognised once again, with a nomination for Project of the Year at the Good for Me, Good for FE Awards.

We're incredibly proud of our *Speak Up* group at Hetton Academy. Their dedication to amplify the voices of their generation saw them receive the Youth Voice Award at the 2025 Together for Children's Young Achievers Awards.

Creating connectivity amongst our communities

Shared cultural and creative experiences have the power to strengthen relationships and creating a greater sense of belonging across Sunderland. We strive to ensure that as many people in the city as possible have opportunities to connect, belong and participate in Sunderland's cultural life.

Ballad of the Crocodile and the Underpass

Delivered in partnership with Washington Heritage Partnership through Community Opportunities, We Make Culture, the University of Sunderland, Baseline, and Arts Centre Washington, *The Ballad of the Crocodile and the Underpass* combined storytelling, music and visual arts to celebrate 60 years of Washington New Town.

With a strong collaboration across the city's cultural and academic sectors, the award-winning project's imaginative approach demonstrated how cross-artform practice can deepen engagement and amplify local voices.

The project gathered stories from residents to create a series of new radio ballads that reflected the lived experiences, memories, and identities of Washington's communities. Presented as part of the anniversary celebrations of Washington New Town, it offered a timely opportunity to reflect on the town's past while engaging new audiences in its evolving story.

Beyond the funded project the podcasters continue to meet at Arts Centre Washington as The Crocodile Collective. Led by local CIC NE Voice the group are continuing to create podcasts about local heritage and issues.


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Our Freedom

This Year Arts Centre Washington took part in Our Freedom - a national project led by Future Arts Centres and Poet Laureate Simon Armitage to mark the anniversary of VE /VJ day.

Arts Centre Washington developed and staged a cross-artform, intergenerational performance that explored personal and collective interpretations of freedom through music, spoken word, movement, and film. The performance *'Unbound: Our Freedom Cabaret'* included members of ACW groups: Washington Youth Theatre, Right Track Young Musicians Collective, Washington Young Film Makers and The Crocodile Collective Podcasting Group.

Alongside the performance, an open exhibition showcased work responding to the theme of freedom by local artists and ACW's Creative Age group. A podcast was also produced, capturing voices, reflections, and stories that ensured the work could reach wider audiences beyond the live events.



3.

1. *The Ballad of the Crocodile and the Underpass Concert at Arts Centre Washington. Photography by Von Fox.*
2/3. *Our Freedom: Unbound Cabaret at Arts Centre Washington. Photography by Von Fox*
4. *Autonomy Project exhibition at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens. Photography by Luminary Photography CIC*

'I got to see what freedom is like for other people and how I relate to the same freedoms as them. It was a really good experience, making new friends and connecting with different people.'
Young film maker participant

Autonomy

Our *Autonomy* programme, aimed to reduce the risk of social isolation for young autistic people by creating regular opportunities to meet, develop friendships and explore shared interests through creativity. Our weekly Special Interests Club has supported social connection and creative confidence. Since the first iteration of the project has come to an end, we have secured the group's future through a partnership with Sunderland College's SEND provision, Directions.

By delivering out-of-hours visiting times at Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens and film screenings at Arts Centre Washington specifically for young people with SEND, we have increased access to some of the city's cultural venues. During Bright Lights Youth Arts Festival, we launched the first Highlights exhibition, creating a new platform to celebrate the creativity of young disabled and neurodiverse artists, increasing representation, visibility and a sense of belonging within Sunderland's cultural community.


4.

Going Places

Going Places is a touring exhibition and engagement programme led by Art Fund and supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Julia Rausing Trust, with additional support from a group of trusts, foundations and individuals.

Sunderland Culture is part of the *Green Spaces, Shared Places* network; one of six UK-wide network partnerships, comprising 20 museums, galleries and heritage sites across the UK. The aim of the network is to co-create touring exhibitions with young people aged 13 – 30 years. For the first exhibition young people from the Celebrate Different Collective and the Conservation Rangers at Durham Wildlife Trust worked with Sunderland Culture staff, freelancers, artists and community groups to explore the impacts of land use change, biodiversity loss, rewilding and climate change in green spaces.



The young people have taken part in oral history and eco-lens training, selected Museum objects, interviewed community participants, contributed interpretation and design ideas and made decisions about the exhibition plans.



Building confidence and aspiration in young people

We are committed to enabling and encouraging creative expression in children and young people with consistent and varied programme of free and low-cost activity across the city. We are also investing in the futures of Sunderland's young creatives, providing opportunities, platforms and skills development that has allowed a new generation to explore a career in the arts.


1.

Culture Start

Culture Start's Creative Sparks after-school clubs and holiday activities are delivered in partnership with community organisations and Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) providers, ensuring children who face the greatest barriers can access creative opportunities outside of school. Creative Sparks delivered over 280 artist-led sessions this year, encouraging children to try something new and be inspired to explore their own creativity in a safe and inclusive environment.

Also part of the Culture Start programme, Future Creatives supports young people to explore pathways into the creative industries and see themselves as active contributors to Sunderland's Cultural life. Launching last year, the community has grown to 175 members and has provided a series of events and workshops to help them build their skills and confidence while connecting with professional artists. Activity so far includes a Dance Bootcamp with Southpaw Dance, a two-day Music Production workshop with Ken Masters, performance opportunities at Summer Streets Festival and trips to see hit shows at Sunderland Empire.



2.

Bright Lights Youth Arts Festival

Bright Lights Youth Arts Festival returned for its fifth year, celebrating the creativity of young people across Sunderland. This multi-artform festival showcased an exciting programme spanning performance, visual arts, music, and digital work, providing a platform for emerging talent to share their voices and ideas.

Taking place across Arts Centre Washington, Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens, and city-wide locations, audiences were invited to engage with work in a range of artforms and take part in free workshops.

This year, we developed our SEND strand with the first Highlights: Disability Arts Exhibition, supported by Autonomy, alongside two SEND takeover days providing creative opportunities for neurodivergent young people in an inclusive environment.

Bright Lights continues to champion participation, diversity, and ambition, placing young people at the heart of the cultural programme. Its fifth anniversary marked both a milestone and a reaffirmation of its importance as a key fixture in Sunderland's cultural calendar, celebrating the next generation of creative talent.


3.

'I draw all the time but this is the first time my work is being shown publicly and its crazy- really cool!'
Participant

Creative Careers

In March, we worked in partnership with InspirED Sunderland Cultural Education Partnership, Culture House Sunderland and Music Connects Sunderland to deliver a city-wide Creative Careers Day, strengthening pathways between education and the creative and cultural sector. Supported through funding from the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority and the Culture Start programme, the event brought together 157 students from schools across Sunderland to explore the breadth of opportunities available within the creative industries.

The day connected young people directly with creative professionals, employers and organisations, helping to raise aspirations, challenge perceptions of creative careers and develop a greater understanding of the skills, routes and opportunities available locally. Speakers including Marie Nixon (Sunderland Empire) and Kema Kay (actor and musician) shared their personal career journeys, while organisations including Into Film, Southpaw Dance, The Fire Station, Sunderland Empire, alongside artists Kerry Cook and Hannah Graham, showcased the diversity of careers within Sunderland's cultural sector.

Speak Up

Between 2023 and 2025, the *Speak Up* programme has supported building confidence and aspiration in young people across Sunderland, empowering more than 500 pupils from five secondary schools to explore important issues through creativity. Pupils from Barbara Priestman Academy, Beacon of Light, Hetton Academy, Oxclose Academy and Thornhill Academy took part in weekly creative sessions alongside more than 25 artists.

Delivered in partnership with the National Theatre, Sunderland Culture and Sunderland Empire, the programme culminated in June 2025 with the vibrant *Can You Hear Us Now?* takeover event at Sheepfolds Stables. More than 120 young people showcased their work through artwork, live podcasts,


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film, animation and interactive workshops.

Participants confidently shared perspectives on identity, community, mental health and the environment, with a youth-led Q&A panel sparking meaningful dialogue with community leaders. One of our *Speak Up* participants, Oliver represented Sunderland at the National Theatre's *Speak Up: Arts Everywhere* Symposium.


5.

1. *Creative Sparks holiday activities at Building Blocks. Photography by Mark Savage*
2. *Bright Lights Youth Arts Festival 2026 launch event. Photography by Von Fox*
3. *Washington Emerging - part of Bright Lights Youth Arts Festival. Photography by Von Fox*

4/5. *Speak Up celebration event at Sheepfolds Stables. Photography by Von Fox.*

Improving health and wellbeing

We use arts, culture and creativity to support happier, healthier lives for people of all ages, improving mental wellbeing, reducing loneliness and helping people feel connected to their communities.

With special thanks to the supporters who donated to our Big Give: Arts for Impact campaign in 2025, we were able to deliver programmes across our venues with the aim to improve wellbeing for people at risk of loneliness or social isolation.

We have grown our creative health programmes to offer more low-cost and free opportunities for the community to come together and engage in arts programmes for the benefit of health and wellbeing. Whether that's staying active with over 50s fitness classes Dance Your Heart Out and Mowbray Movers or staying social while trying something new with the Community Choir, Washington Writers Group and art clubs.

At Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens, the opening of Mowbray Park Community Garden by Sunderland City Council and Just Let Your Soul Grow has allowed us to offer more outdoor activity. The people of Sunderland can surround themselves in nature and learn more about the things that grow and live among us with activities such as Bloom and Bop, the silent garden disco for kids, the Big Garden Birdwatch and open volunteer sessions.



Above and below right: Creative age groups at Arts Centre Washington and Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens.

Creative Age

Creative Age brings together participants over 50 for creative experiences, providing a safe space for connection and creative expression. Over the year, they have worked with staff and artists to try different art techniques and learn new skills including glass and watercolour painting, clay modelling and textile crafts, taking inspiration from the exhibition programme and Museum Collections.

The Creative Age group have also been involved in the Creative Coal project, a co-produced initiative led by Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens developing a resource box and activities that aim to improve wellbeing and social connection for vulnerable older adults living in Sunderland, through creative engagement with local heritage.



Creative Coal Wellbeing Box trail at Holly House. Photography by Second Draft.

The Creative Coal project is part of Working Together – an 18-month Creative Health programme supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and co-delivered by the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance and Group for Education in Museums. It aimed to embed creative health practice within selected Museums and heritage organisations by supporting them to develop a pilot project in response to local health and social needs.

'This is my happy place'
Creative Age participant

Staff Wellbeing

Thanks to Sunderland City Council's Links for Life project, we were able to invest in the health and wellbeing of the people who make our cultural spaces welcoming, creative and vibrant every day. Over the course of three months, Sunderland Culture staff, freelancers and partners took part in a programme of creative and mindful wellbeing activities while supporting local creative and health practitioners. Sessions included holistic treatments, ceramics and crochet workshops and gong bathing, offering people time and space to pause, connect, learn something new and recharge. To strengthen our commitment to staff wellbeing, we applied to join the Better Health at Work Award scheme. This will provide a structured framework to embed health and wellbeing across the organisation, supporting a positive workplace culture and ensuring staff wellbeing remains a key organisational priority.



Growing the Creative Economy



Above and below right: It Starts with Culture - a Culture Start advocacy event at Sheepfolds Stables. Photography by Mark Savage.

By supporting artists, freelancers, creative businesses, volunteers and cultural organisations, we create opportunities for people to develop skills, access employment and contribute to Sunderland's growth, ensuring culture continues to play a vital role in the city's future.

Culture Start

Culture Start is a city-wide partnership led by Sunderland Culture, bringing together cultural, education, community and public sector organisations to improve access to creative opportunities for children and young people, particularly those facing the greatest barriers.

As part of Sunderland's commitment to a strong and inclusive creative economy, the partnership provides a shared framework for cross-sector working - aligning investment, building capacity, encouraging a more joined-up creative offer while supporting partners to text new approaches and share learning.

Poverty Proofing®

A key part of Culture Start's legacy is the delivery of Poverty Proofing®, a programme developed by Children North East to help cultural organisations identify and remove barriers that people experiencing financial disadvantage may face when accessing arts and culture.

Through consultations and community conversations, several common challenges have emerged including the promotion of free activities for families, cost and practicality of travel, and access to affordable food provision during their visit. These insights are helping organisations make practical changes to ensure their programmes and venues are more welcoming and accessible, embedding more inclusive practice across Sunderland's cultural sector.

Ignite Bursary

Ignite Bursaries were established as part of Culture Start to support young people to access creative opportunities they might not otherwise afford. Each bursary is tailored to the interests and ambitions of the individual, enabling meaningful engagement in the arts.

Now on to the third round, Ignite has enabled more than 90 young people to develop their skills, explore pathways into creative education and build confidence in their artistic practice. We have invested £49,650 in bursaries to young people, who have gone on to purchase equipment and software essential to their creative practice, fund trips to performances or exhibitions, undertake training and more.

Unlock: Creative Business Support

Our Unlock business support programme continues through the UKSPF-funded Innovate & Grow programme, delivered in partnership with the University of Sunderland and Sunderland City Council. During 2025/26, 15 creative businesses received grants totalling £25,000 to help develop new products, reach new markets and invest in digital capability. Support enabled organisations to create films, podcasts and marketing assets, adopt AI and new technologies, purchase specialist equipment and access business development opportunities. A further six creative practitioners also benefited from tailored mentoring, strengthening skills in areas including fundraising, printmaking and choreography, helping creative businesses become more resilient, ambitious and sustainable.



City Volunteers

In 2025, we partnered with Culture House Sunderland, Foundation of Light and Sunderland BID to launch a new volunteer recruitment process benefiting both organisations and the individuals. With support from NEMSA's Festival and Events fund, those interested in getting involved with city events can apply once, receive high quality training and get exclusive access to opportunities to volunteer.

With 68 people signed up, the programme helps more people get involved in the moments that matter in the city – including the Radio 1 Big Weekend.

Our year in figures

571,037
Visitors

138
Exhibitions, performances and events

36,065
Participants

7313
School visitors

540
Volunteer hours

122.5
student placement hours

297
Artist and freelancer collaborations

33
Unlock grants

104
bursaries for young people

1,048,365
Web visitors

76,467
Social media followers



Public Record at The Fire Station. Photography by Luke Waddington.

Closing remarks

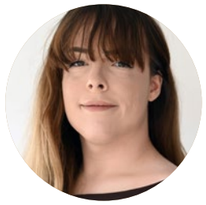
A word from our Core Partners

Our core partners Sunderland City Council, University of Sunderland and Sunderland Music, Arts & Culture Trust are key to us achieving our mission.

"As the newly elected Portfolio Holder for Culture Tourism and Heritage I am delighted to contribute to the Sunderland Culture Annual Review 2025/26

As a council, we remain committed to strengthening our partnerships and investing in festivals, events, new technology, and high-quality cultural programmes that enhance the lives of our communities and support the businesses that underpin our local economy.

Working in partnership with Sunderland Culture, we will continue to grow our visitor economy while creating new opportunities for our young people in skills development and directly supporting more entrepreneurial creativity."



Cllr Ciera Hudspith
Portfolio Holder, Culture,
Tourism & Heritage
Sunderland City Council

"As a founding member of Sunderland Culture, the University recognises the vital role that the arts and creativity play in enhancing opportunities and enriching lives across our city.

The relocation of the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art (NGCA) to the new Culture House – following the closure of the National Glass Centre in July 2026 – alongside progress on the Glassworks project signals an exciting new chapter for cultural activities in the city, bringing fresh energy and vibrancy to Sunderland in the coming years.

I congratulate Sunderland Culture for its work in championing talent, inspiring communities, and showcasing work of real significance."



Sir David Bell,
Vice-Chancellor and
Chief Executive,
University of Sunderland

"It has been another successful year for Sunderland Culture with another great series of eclectic and vibrant exhibitions, performances and programmes.

A special mention must be given to the award-winning Public Record, which perfectly illustrated how diverse communities in our City worked together collaboratively to produce a wonderful piece of art.

A particular joy for me this year has been as a proud member of the bursary panel for the Culture Start programme, helping children and young people in Sunderland to realise their creative ambitions."

Michelle Daurat
Chief Executive,
Sunderland Music,
Arts and Culture Trust, and
Sunderland Music City CIC



Chief Executive's Reflection

Sunderland Culture reflects the city we serve – ambitious, collaborative and creative. We are proud of our rich heritage and remain committed to a future where everyone can play a part in the city's cultural life.

This was evidenced in new and powerful ways in April 2025 with Public Record – a hugely impactful collaboration with Sunderland Empire and the National Theatre, offering a portrait of the city through the voices and experiences of local people.

Across our venues, audiences enjoyed an outstanding programme of exhibitions and events. Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art presented major exhibitions including Ro Robertson and Hetain Patel's Come As You Really Are. Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens showcased Sheila Fell: Cumberland on Canvas, Going Back Brockens and a new, comprehensive presentation of Rebel Women of Sunderland. At National Glass Centre, Julia Stephenson curated a fitting final exhibition programme, culminating in The Graduates – a celebration of nearly three decades of internationally recognised glassmaking. Looking ahead, plans continue for Glassworks: Sunderland, a new creative space for glassmaking in Sunniside which sets out to retain the world-class making community that continues the city's 1350-year history of glass.

Alongside our exhibitions and performances, learning and participation remain central to everything we do. Through our schools, community and family programmes, we continue to ensure that people of all ages can experience the benefits of creativity and culture. Arts Centre Washington remains at the heart of this work, welcoming over 150,000 visitors each year and we look forward to marking its 50th anniversary in 2027.

Our partnerships continue to create lasting impact. Through our innovative Culture Start partnership, more than 9,000 children and young people have accessed creative opportunities across the city. Meanwhile, Unlock, our business support programme delivered in partnership with Sunderland City Council, and the new City Volunteers initiative, a collaborative effort from various local organisations and venues, are supporting artists, creative businesses and volunteers to contribute to Sunderland's growing creative economy.

None of this would be possible without the dedication of our staff, freelancers, artists, volunteers, partners, trustees, supporters, and the strategic leadership that drives ambition and change on behalf of the city. We are equally grateful to our funders, particularly Arts Council England, whose continued investment enables us to deliver ambitious cultural programmes that make a real difference.

This annual review offers just a glimpse of what has been another remarkable year. Thank you to everyone who has been part of Sunderland Culture's journey. We look forward to continuing to create, connect and inspire together.

Nick Malyan
Chief Executive



Looking Ahead

Culture House Sunderland

Culture House will be a transformative new civic space at the heart of Sunderland, bringing together creativity, learning and community in one accessible, welcoming destination. It will provide a home for culture in all its forms - from libraries and digital innovation to exhibitions, performance and co-created community activity - supporting learning and opportunities to have new experiences at every stage of life and widening participation in the arts. By offering flexible spaces for making, sharing and connecting, Culture House will help grow the city's creative economy, nurture local talent, and attract new visitors and investment.

They are working with a wide range of creative partners across the city, building strong, collaborative relationships that will shape and animate the programme. Central to this is the ongoing close partnership with Sunderland Culture, ensuring a joined-up, ambitious offer that connects people, places and opportunities across Sunderland's evolving cultural landscape.

NGCA relocation

The Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art (NGCA) enters a new chapter as part of the University of Sunderland's plans for a dynamic new space within Culture House Sunderland. The University has been working with Sunderland Culture and Sunderland City Council to ensure the new gallery space is inspiring and accessible, where visitors from across the city, region, and beyond can enjoy creative works from a variety of artists.

The space aims to strengthen links between education, creativity, and the city's cultural life and will provide a prominent public platform for students and staff to exhibit work, collaborate, and showcase the breadth of the University's artistic talent.

Professor Kevin Petrie, Strategic Lead for the Centre for Creative Practice Research, School of Media and Creative Industries, said: "We are working to bring a diverse range of visual art into the NGCA programme. Over the next two years we plan a range of exhibitions of professional artists, academic creative work and student projects. This new space will highlight how creativity can challenge, inspire, communicate - and delight."

NGCA is the longest-established contemporary art gallery in the North East of England. For more than half a century, it has brought nationally and internationally significant artists to Sunderland while championing regional and emerging talent

A consistent and positive force in the region's arts ecology, its next chapter at Culture House will connect high-quality contemporary art with an even wider audience.

Glassworks

Glassworks: Sunderland will be a new world-class facility for people to create in glass and ceramics. In 2025, Sunderland Culture was awarded £5M from the DCMS Cultural Development Fund, administered by Arts Council England. The project will transform the former Peter Smith Antiques building into a vibrant hub for glassmaking, ceramics and creative production, providing specialist facilities, workspace, learning opportunities and business support for makers and creative enterprises.

Across 2025-26, we worked with a specialist design team to produce a new design for the building. Developed with artists, makers and creative businesses playing a central role in shaping the proposals. Their involvement has helped ensure the project responds directly to the needs of Sunderland's creative community while building on the city's internationally recognised glassmaking heritage.

Supporting the Sunniside Place Strategy, Glassworks will be a catalyst for regeneration and an anchor business in the city, supporting business growth and creating opportunities for people to learn, make and develop new skills. Glassworks is set to be open to the public in 2028.

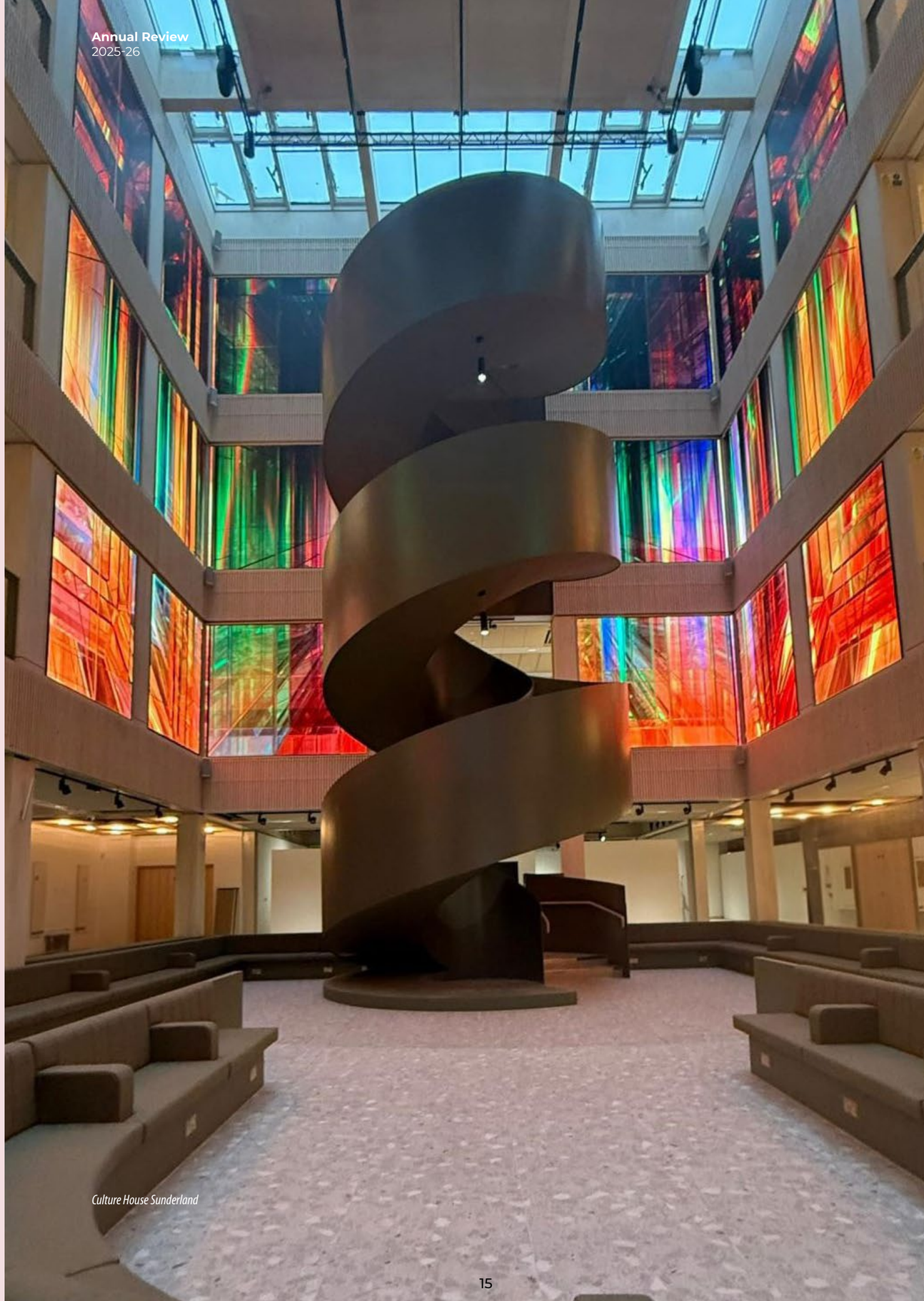
Museum Redevelopment

Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens is undergoing a major redevelopment following the award of £5.2 million from The National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2025, as part of a wider £13.6 million investment. The project will transform the ground floor, delivering two new galleries, a new entrance from Mowbray Park, improved social spaces, enhanced wayfinding, and external landscape upgrades.

While highly valued by residents and visitors, the building requires significant renewal, particularly to its mechanical and electrical systems. The redevelopment will address these needs while introducing new displays and interpretation to bring Sunderland's rich heritage to life.

A strong local narrative will guide visitors through the museum's collections, showcasing previously unseen objects and highlights from social history, archaeology, ethnography, and natural sciences. Glass and pottery will feature prominently.

The scheme also includes a new reception, shop, café, and improved visitor facilities, supported by a city-wide Activity Plan engaging communities across Sunderland.



Culture House Sunderland

SUNDERLAND CULTURE

Thank you

We are hugely grateful to our partners, funders, donors and everyone who has supported our work during 2025-26. This has enabled us to offer a remarkable range of high quality cultural, heritage and creative activities in Sunderland for people to enjoy, experience and participate in.

Thank you to our founding partners for their vision and support in establishing Sunderland Culture.

Sunderland City Council | University of Sunderland | MACSunderland Music, Arts and Culture Trust

We wish to thank everyone who generously donated to our Big Give Arts for Impact campaign in 2025. Thanks to Arts Council England for its support for Sunderland Culture as a National Portfolio Organisation. Sunderland Culture is funded by the UK Government through the Shared Prosperity Fund.

Culture Start is supported by a £1.2m Place Partnership award from Arts Council England through the National Lottery, and generously funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Sir James Knott Trust and the Gillian Dickinson Trust.

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We wish to thank the following for their support during 2025-26:

The Albany – Family Arts Network
Art Angel
Arts Council England
Art Fund
Art Network North East
Association of Independent Museums (via DCMS Know Your Neighbourhood Fund)
ATG Entertainment
Big Give
Building Culture CIC
The Cultural Spring
Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance
The Eaton Fund
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
Film Hub North with National Lottery Funding on behalf of the BFI Film Audience Network
Future Arts Centres
Garfield Weston Foundation
Gillian Dickinson Trust
Group for Education in Museums (GEM)
Granada Foundation
Henry Moore Foundation
The Julia Rausing Trust
Maximillian William
The National Foundation for Youth Music
National Lottery Heritage Fund
National Theatre
North East Mayoral Strategic Authority
Northern Centre of Photography
REECE Foundation
Scops Arts Trust
Sir James Knott Trust
Sport England
Sunderland City Council
Sunderland Music, Arts and Culture Trust
Sunderland Music City
Sunderland Voluntary Sector Alliance
Tate Gallery – British Art Network Bursary Award 2025
Tullie
UK Shared Prosperity Fund with Sunderland City Council
University of Sunderland – Innovate & Grow, supported by UK Shared Prosperity Fund
Washington Heritage Partnership

We are delighted Sunderland City Council has received funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery players and the DCMS Museum Estate and Development Fund, administered by Arts Council England to support the redevelopment of Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens.

Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND | Funded by UK Government | Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND LOTTERY FUNDED | Made possible with Heritage Fund | Supported using public funding by Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

There are lots of ways you can help more people experience great art and culture, by making a donation, leaving a legacy, sponsoring an activity or volunteering your time.

For more information on how to make an incredible difference, please visit:
sunderlandculture.org.uk/support-us

Sunderland Culture is a Registered Charity, no 1184073.

Keep in touch with our programme and sign up for updates on www.sunderlandculture.org.uk

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