



THE REAL IMPACT OF THE GREATER MANCHESTER CULTURE FUND

A GM wide analysis and engagement

RISE

GMCA GREATER
MANCHESTER
COMBINED
AUTHORITY

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INTRODUCTION

The contribution of arts and culture has long been measured in economic and societal terms. From regeneration and attracting talent to business investment and supporting the visitor economy, there is a wealth of data showing the critical role that arts and culture play in economic renewal. In the last year alone, Manchester's cultural sector is reported to have generated an economic impact of more than £342million for the city, supporting at least 4,800 full time jobs¹. The Lowry in Salford contributes more than £47m GVA² per year, the Octagon Theatre in Bolton brings in more than £10m p/a to the local economy³ and altogether, the visitor economy of Greater Manchester is estimated to be worth more than £9b p/a⁴.

The culture sector is also now increasingly recognised for its 'social value' and this term has become a way to categorise how arts and culture impact individuals and groups. There is less data available on the positive societal impact that arts and culture deliver, but when combined with a strong economic contribution, the effects can be transformational.

Greater Manchester's (GM) Culture Fund was established to help grow this transformational economy, marrying economic growth with the need to enhance wellbeing, address health inequalities, strengthen communities and promote social mobility. It requires applicants to meet at least two of the following priorities:

- Contribute to the recognition of GM locally, nationally and internationally to attract new investment, new visitors and new talent to the region;

- Make a positive contribution to improving skills and employability of residents in GM, including support for the creative education, expression and ambition of young people across GM;
- Play a strong role in developing strong and inclusive communities and an improved quality of life for residents, particularly those residents at risk of disengagement or social isolation; and
- Be able to evidence how the project will make a positive contribution to improving residents' health and wellbeing.

The fund has been running now for several decades and is firmly established. With a new Greater Manchester Strategy published in July, 2025⁵, it is considered timely to undertake a review of the fund's social and economic impact as well as to consider how accessible its outputs are to residents across the region. Using data analysis and extensive engagement, this report takes a fresh look at the fund, allowing a compelling story to emerge around the real impact of arts and culture across GM.

¹ [Manchester City Council's Annual Report on Culture \(2025\)](#)

² [Lowry-Making-Culture-Count \(5\).pdf](#)

³ [Our year in stats | Octagon Bolton](#)

⁴ [Greater Manchester Unveils Five-Year Visitor Economy Strategy for Sustainable Growth](#)

⁵ [Greater Manchester Strategy](#)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The early modernist painter, Marc Chagall, once noted that, “great art picks up where nature ends.” Our review of the Greater Manchester Culture Fund suggests this observation ought to be updated to show how great art now also picks up where vital support services end.

For while the public largely view art and culture through the lens of performance, human expression and creativity, many would be surprised to learn how Manchester’s sector is stepping in to support the mental and physical health and wellbeing of residents and cohesion of communities across the city region.

In the course of our engagement with organisations funded through GM’s Culture Fund, we learned how many were now doing heavy social policy lifting and going above and beyond their traditional remit. We saw theatres working with Pupil Referral Units and helping young people aged between 11-16 who have been excluded from school get back into education. We saw arts organisations working with homeless people to help them back into employment and orchestras bringing a tear to patients’ eyes as they played in hospital wards.

Furthermore, we heard from dance companies working in schools to support children’s mental health and a literature festival providing support for parents to give them confidence to read to their children. We heard from arts centres providing recipe cards and video tutorials for food bank users, performance groups supporting refugees and theatres that support children with autism, carers and the local deaf society.

Throughout our discussions, support for communities around issues such as loneliness, mental health or homelessness was a recurring theme. Services had widened to people on the edge and while their remit remained to empower and

inspire, sometimes it was about throwing people a lifeline.

“People are really struggling - and sometimes it’s art organisations and artists, who don’t have a healthcare background, that are providing the only human contact for people every week,” one community arts project manager explained.

But if our research showed how arts and culture organisations were assuming a bigger social purpose, it also revealed that they were extending their geographical reach. Whether it was outreach work, touring performances or increased collaboration, services could not be limited to serving one community.

Physical locations no longer exclusively signified where organisations worked – indeed some organisations did not have a physical location at all and took their work to communities through drop-in centres, schools, colleges and other meeting places. Arts and culture organisations frequently crossed local authority boundaries and looked to reach as many people in GM as possible.

If any organisation best exemplified this boundary hopping spirit it was GRIT studios, an arts studio that provides affordable space for around 80 artists across GM. Founded in Stockport and now working in several boroughs, their target is to work in all ten GM boroughs before 2030.

“The beauty of the region is that it’s all so interconnected and everyone knows each other,” explains co-founder John Macaulay. “We just see the GM geography as our boundary. With 2.8 million people living in a confined space there is a great opportunity. The funding we’ve received has given us confidence to take more risk, to spread our wings and go further afield.”



“People are really struggling - and sometimes it’s art organisations and artists, who don’t have a healthcare background, that are providing the only human contact for people every week.”

GM is now the biggest creative industry cluster outside of London and our research also noted statistically significant relationships between creative industry job growth and the location of the investments made by this fund. These investments are not just a heavy downpayment on supporting local communities. They are likely to be a central to the economic growth being experienced in the city region.

Further analysis showed that growth population across GM was linked to areas that had good access to the organisations supported by this fund. For as well as taking on a bigger social purpose, many arts and culture organisations were also assuming an important placemaking role.

In many respects this is not new. Arts and culture have always been a powerful tool for urban regeneration. But the work of arts organisations and cultural activities in Stockport and Chapel Street in Salford, for example, to make the areas more attractive for development should not go unnoticed. Beyond the city centre, arts and culture has a significant role to play as a catalyst for wider regeneration.

There are undoubtedly challenges to ensuring all areas have optimum access to cultural organisations, as this report highlights. And improving transport connectivity will be key as, even if this fund was spread equitably geographically, there would still be cultural cold spots due to deficiencies in the network. But, as this report shows, the impact of the GM Culture Fund is considerable not only in supporting vulnerable groups, but also through driving social mobility, reducing health inequalities and creating resilient places.

By continuing to invest in arts and culture, Greater Manchester’s Combined Authority is helping to create a powerful ecology of social innovation and hope.

**Table 1 - Key observations summarised**

KEY OBSERVATION	NARATIVE
Cultural investment supports population growth	It is clear from the analysis that culture investment is supporting population growth. People like to live in interesting places and this investment in culture is helping drive housing values (through population growth) which is attracting capital for the city's development.
Cultural industry employment growth	The fund is supporting employment growth in two ways: (i) it is helping support the sector by creating a labour force that is suited to the expansion of the creative industry sector; and (ii) by attracting and retaining talented people who enhance the labour force. The population growth the fund is supporting has a knock-on effect.
The breadth of outreach and depth of community engagement across Greater Manchester ensures that the impact of investment is felt well beyond its physical footprint	Most organisations receiving funding from the Culture Fund are doing a significant amount of outreach work and impact most of the city region. Those attending the focus groups believed the people using their services and attending their events were not aware where they are primarily based and that their location was more of a business decision due to the requirements for staffing and cost. Moving them however could be detrimental because of the reasons they are there in the first place.
Culture organisations are picking up the pieces from gaps in public services	The symptoms from stretched public services are being remedied by culture organisations. Without this vital funding, a significant number of additional costs will be transferred elsewhere in the public sector. For many people, the work delivered through arts and culture organisations featured in this report is a lifeline and a loss of funding would have severe wider social outcomes.

Source: RISE

METHODOLOGY

We employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for data collection and conducted a comprehensive review of all organizations receiving funding.

The data analysis involved the creation of a metric to compare localized areas (LSOAs) in GM based on the physical accessibility of funded institutions via the transport network. This was done for public transport and highways. The Culture Effective Density (CED) metric was developed to enhance understanding of the regions with the greatest access to cultural services funded by the GM fund, and to enable comparisons with other factors such as regional growth.

Travel time data was provided by Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM), while employment and population data were sourced from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the Business Register of Employment Survey (BRES). The GMCA Culture Team supplied the funding amounts allocated to each institution, which were used to weight the CED scores for each LSOA. Further analysis was then conducted to assess the impact of CED on growth within GM and evaluate the equitable distribution of access to cultural institutions receiving GM funding.

To support this analysis and capture the social impacts of the fund, engagement activities were conducted across the city region. This highlighted that local authority boundaries are perceived as arbitrary by those accessing cultural services.

Our engagement activities included two workshops, one held at the Band on the Wall music venue in Manchester on April 24th and an additional online session on May 14th, as well as a series of one-to-one interviews. These interviews and focus groups aimed to examine the operations of funded organizations and understand the impact they have on individuals' lives.

Both workshops were attended by representatives from a strong geographical spread of organisations, and supplemented with one-to-one interviews for those unable to attend. Written submissions were also invited and we received a broad range of materials from reports to individual and group testimonies. Analysis of the focus groups, interviews and all other collected data informed the conclusions of this report.



ENGAGEMENT

Engagement activities were carried out over a period of two months and saw us consult widely with organisations ranging from The Halle, Royal Exchange Theatre and Factory International to GRIT Studios, Bury Met and Company Chameleon. Discussions were impassioned and centred on how organisations impacted on people's lives across the region and audience reach. Feedback from both workshops and one-to-one interviews is below.



WORKSHOP AT BAND ON THE WALL ON APRIL 24TH

AUDIENCE REACH

While many of the participant organisations had a physical location, they all covered a wider geographical reach than their immediate patch. This was largely due to outreach projects, engagement work and schools' programmes. The Royal Exchange, for example, take up residency in communities across GM, working in a different borough every year. Added to this, they engage with 3,000 students through their schools' programme. Halle Manchester also works across the region in various settings and in collaboration with different services. This includes care home and hospital projects, as well as work with several day centres, charities and trusts.

Similarly, Company Chameleon have worked in all 10 GM boroughs delivering dance workshops. This work ranges from dancing in prisons and libraries to exploring mental health through creative movement in schools. We heard multiple stories like this with all organisations showing a commitment to cross local authority boundaries and build links with communities across the region.

The Lowry, for example, provide workshops, projects and programmes in schools across GM. Z Arts also delivers touring theatre shows and outreach programmes with local communities, schools and college groups. And Cartwheel Arts not only run the creative health network serving arts practitioners across GM, but also produce art through different media and artforms in Rochdale, Oldham, Bury, Wigan and North Manchester.

Yet while all organisations expressed a wish to work in as many communities as possible, some acknowledged that transport was a barrier to accessing culture.

"It's written in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that every citizen should have access to arts and culture," explained Hebe Reilly from Cartwheel Arts. "But there are parts of GM where people do not have access...because transport is not accessible. We work in Heywood and it's really poorly served by public transport. It's really hard to get to and from Heywood."



She added that they don't have a fixed venue so they go out and work in community centres. "We go and meet people where they're at. This works for us because some people find it really intimidating going into a giant glass building."

Some of this work is with young people and, on occasion, they take them to bigger arts performances. As an example, she mentioned working taking young people from the Darnhill estate in Heywood to see a show at the Royal Exchange in Manchester. "Some of them had never been to Manchester City Centre before and it's less than 10 miles away."

While we heard differing perspectives from large and small organisations in the room, it was freely acknowledged that GM's arts and culture ecosystem needed both. Larger organisations were praised

"There are cuts everywhere and lots of services like youth services and mental health are losing out. It feels like what's happening more and more in the arts is that we are picking up these cuts. Whether it's youth activity, providing sanctuary, we are doing a lot and getting spread too thin. There is nowhere else for people to go."

Cartwheel Arts



for bringing in international artists and raising ambitions, while smaller organisations were similarly recognised for building trust and establishing a deep reach in communities.

A note of caution was sounded, however, over funding larger organisations to work in the outlying boroughs. It was suggested that this funding should go to smaller organisations who were already working outside of the city centre in outlying boroughs doing really good work on a shoestring.

SOCIAL IMPACT

Many of the participant organisations were experienced at working in deprived communities and spoke of how arts and culture were frequently plugging a gap left by the loss of key services.

'We've witnessed first-hand the lack of other services – a lack of health services and social care,' explained Hebe Reilly from Cartwheel Arts. "People are really struggling - and sometimes it's art organisations and artists, who don't have a healthcare background, that are providing the only human contact for people every week."

Similarly, organisations working in deprived areas spoke of how arts and culture provided a lifeline for many. Company Chameleon is a case in point. An international touring dance theatre based in Openshaw, one of the most deprived wards in GM, it stages over 50 indoor and outdoor performances a year providing opportunities for everyone. They are the only arts organisation in Openshaw and have a



key mission of delivering cultural opportunities to people who might not typically access them. These opportunities extend to touring around the world – in places such as Germany, Italy and France – and supporting local people to go to dance school in London. However, they also have a key focus on supporting wellbeing and building esteem.

“We are in Openshaw but very visible in going out into communities across GM and building partnerships to support young people with mental health,” explained Leanne Feeley, the General Manager.

Others added that this side of their work was becoming more frequent.

“There are cuts everywhere and lots of services like youth services and mental health are losing out. It feels like what’s happening more and more in the arts is that we are picking up these cuts,” said Sarah Emmott from Art with Heart. “Whether it’s youth activity, providing sanctuary, we are doing a lot and getting spread too thin. There is nowhere else for people to go.”

Others notes that arts and culture were now performing vital work that other traditional services would not be able to deliver. “The arts can do incredible things to support people’s wellbeing and help them reframe their trauma,” explained Paul Hine from Made by Mortals. “It’s not just about picking up people that are falling through the gaps. It’s about the arts offering something different. It’s much more empowering for someone to share their lived experience through art and see something being created as a result. If you take away the arts you won’t have that.”

This triggered a wider discussion around how art is where people see themselves and how it can help create a stronger sense of identity and build confidence. In particular, Manchester Pride was cited as a strong example of how people found a sense of belonging and often moved to Manchester because they wanted to be part of a big LGBTQB community.



Company Chameleon

Participants also discussed how art and culture could transform lives, raise aspirations and give people a sense of hope in the process. “I recall in a spray-painting workshop in a residential care home a young person telling me, ‘I didn’t know you could do art as a job’, she was just excited at the possibility of making a living from doing something you love,” said Sarah Emmott from Art with Heart.

Discussions concluded with a passionate defence of the contribution arts and culture makes to Manchester. “Without this fund, our sector will be scaled down. Manchester is so well known for having a great cultural offer; people want to live here because of it. But things are bleak right now and a lot of us would struggle to exist without this money. Lots of organisations are looking at closing and without this fund the culture sector in GM could collapse.”

ONLINE WORKSHOP 14TH MAY

This was equally well attended by a wide range of arts, heritage, music and performance organisations. As with the previous workshop, we quickly discovered that there was a commitment from all participating organisations to cross local authority boundaries and build links with communities across the region.

AUDIENCE REACH

Despite participants representing diverse geographical settings from across the ten boroughs, much of their work extended beyond their physical location to reach communities everywhere in GM. GRIT Studios, for example, is an arts studio based in the Great Northern Warehouse in Manchester. It provides affordable studio space for around 80 artists across GM. “There is a chronic shortage of studio space in GM,” explains John Macaulay, “as all the old mills and warehouses where artists used to frequent are now one bedroomed apartments. We have over 200 people on our waiting list. Some 62 per cent of our artists have never had a studio before. They worked on their kitchen table, so we are giving them a first step into the world of being self-employed.”

When they started a few years ago, GRIT were only based in Stockport. Now they are working in

Manchester, Salford, Tameside, Rochdale, Trafford and their ambition is to provide affordable studio in all ten GM boroughs in the next four years. “We see the opportunity and we don’t want to go outside GM. The beauty of the region is that it’s all so interconnected and everyone knows each other,” explains Macaulay. “We just see the GM geography as our boundary really. With 2.8 million people living in a confined space there is a great opportunity. The funding we’ve received has given us confidence to take more risk, to spread our wings and go further afield.”

Rochdale-based English Folk Expo Sound Roots is another example of an arts organisation that works across the whole of GM. “We do events in every borough,” explains chief executive David Agnew, and they also have a good record of reaching new audiences. “At Manchester Folk Festival we had around 30 per cent of ticket holders saying it was their first time seeing music in Greater Manchester and 75 per cent said it was their first time seeing music in some of the venues we used as well, so we are really moving people around GM in terms of working with a niche genre.”

For some of the participant organisations, working across local authority boundaries was a given

GRIT Studios, Salford





GRIT Studios – La Bocka to La Stocka mural project

because they did not have a fixed location. “We don’t have a venue so we work in a lot of drop-in centres, schools, colleges and other meeting places and this allows us to create a space where people are relaxed and it helps us build trust over time,” explains Kayleigh Swanson from Music Action International.

SOCIAL IMPACT

Participants were invited to share evidence of how their work is impacting on people across GM and we captured a broad spread of evidence to show the social value it generates. This ranged from Manchester Histories explaining how celebrating the region’s histories strengthened people’s sense of belonging and identity to the Met in Bury discussing various projects they run to support children with autism, carers and young people. As part of the latter, Bury Met has a recording studio that supports young people not in education, employment or training and also the local deaf society. In addition, they have

taken on a placemaking role to adopt empty units in the high street and support start-up food businesses.

This placemaking role was a key feature of a number of other arts organisations. GRIT Studios, for example, “add colour and vibrancy” to places by converting empty buildings into art studios. They also create murals, street art and build a stronger sense of community. “All of our studios were empty for between three and ten years,” explained John Macaulay, “and we are creating economic value. We pay business rates, utilities and bring spaces back to life.”

In Stockport, for example, they flew five celebrated artists over from Argentina to create a huge mural in the town centre, which has supported the town’s regeneration. “It was a big project and we had 200 people from the community involved in it from the beginning, covering everything from scrubbing the wall clean to getting teas and coffees and helping generate creative ideas.”

“For a lot of them, this keeps them in the game. It’s so lonely. If you were just doing it on your kitchen table there is more chance of you giving up. Whereas if you are going into a studio with purpose, having conversations with others, sharing problems and ideas...well that’s where the magic happens.”

Macaulay added that for most of the creatives they supported in getting studio space, this was the first space they had secured. “This has a huge impact. It’s really tough to make a living as a musician or artist but we try and create a safe working environment where they can speak to others. For a lot of them, this keeps them in the game. It’s so lonely. If you were just doing it on your kitchen table there is more chance of you giving up. Whereas if you are going into a studio with purpose, having conversations with others, sharing problems and ideas...well that’s where the magic happens.”

Participants also agreed that arts and culture can play a key in town centre regeneration because high streets are rapidly changing and companies like Amazon and online shopping generally is starting to make a lot of traditional shops unviable. That is why they are keen to broker meanwhile use deals with landlords to use bricks and mortar as a test-bed for artists and cultural businesses.

A further theme was that of encouraging social mobility. Organisations such as From The Other, spoke of how they strived to share opportunities and develop under-represented young musicians. Thousands of musicians from across GM have performed in their Sounds from the Other City festival which takes place in pubs, churches, studios, cafes, museums, libraries and ‘in-between’ spaces in Salford.

Also, their work in organising this festival has helped contribute to the regeneration of Chapel Street in Salford. “This area has changed unbelievably but when we started 20 years ago there was nothing else there,” explains From the Other Director Mark Carlin.

FURTHER INTERVIEWS

A number of additional one-to-one interviews were carried out over a period of two months and a summary of feedback is listed below. In all of these interviews, the wider social benefits of arts and culture, and impact on communities came across very strongly.

INCLUSION

Inclusion is a critical element of the arts and culture interviews we engaged with. Before they can offer opportunities for recovery through creative expression, they must first get participants through the door.

“I suppose a really big characteristic of the feedback we receive is that one of the most important things we offer is a space that people genuinely feel is safe, non-judgmental, inspiring and social. You know. It’s inclusion. People genuinely feel that.”

Jacqui Wood, Chief Executive, Arc

“By raising the visibility of communities and giving them permission to be proud of the cultural activity they do in spaces, MACFEST (Muslim Arts & Culture Festival), does incredible work to break down barriers. Qaisra (founder) is a lightning conductor for creativity and brings lots of people into creative spaces that they normally wouldn’t visit.”

Sam Ingleson, Associate Dean, School of Arts, Media and Creative Technology, Salford University



“We run the Studio School with Pupil Referral Units with young people who have either already been excluded or have been recognised by their teachers as being at risk of exclusion because of their behaviour. We have success because we are not in the formal education establishment. People come out of school, they go into our media lounge and record music. They can talk about their interests; they have creative output and at the same time they are building their confidence. Our aim is to help these pupils get back into formal education. Once they have done some projects and self-directed learning

they can go back to their teachers and talk about what they have gained from this. Their teachers come and visit them sometimes too. Some children really enjoy our Studio School and go straight back into education. One teenager did so well last year that he applied to a music course at Manchester College and was given a place. Unfortunately, though, the children are getting younger. Schools are now referring people at risk of exclusion at later primary level.”

Jane Hall, Development Manager, Contact Theatre



Contact Theatre, Manchester – The Agency Project

SAFE SPACE

Many of the service users found greater success in expressing themselves through creative practices than with traditional talking therapies. Some people who had experienced discrimination, violence, fear or trauma didn't know how to articulate what they were going through. Creative practice gave them another means of expressing and dealing with historic and current trauma.

The importance of safety was critical, whether that referred to a safe place with no fear of physical violence or more simply an environment where people felt safe to explore, to express, to paint, to play, to discuss and to share.

“Art and Soul is one of our longest running groups that works with adults with mild to severe mental health problems. And they come to that group with the knowledge that they’ll access creative engagement through an artist. But there will also be a qualified mental health practitioner in that space. Some of them are living in NHS supported environments, and then they’re coming out to work with us and can have diagnosis of schizophrenia, Bipolar, OCD, Generalized Anxiety. That mental health support also enables us to support those individuals as artists, and for them to get on with their development as artists.”

Hebe Reilly, Creative Director / CEO, Cartwheel Arts

“The initial thing is just building trust in the other humans around us, knowing that they’re safe to make mistakes, knowing that they’re allowed to play because a lot of people have missed that phase of their life. We work with children in prison. Some of them haven’t gone through the phase of play. And that affects how your brain develops. So, we teach them that you won’t come to harm if you join in in this space. That’s the initial bit and then we start to explore more of the complex subjects where we use our bodies.”

Rebecca Friel MBE, CEO, Odd Arts

EMPOWERING PEOPLE

The impact of people taking part in creative activities organised by these organisations goes far beyond the piece of work they produce. The very process of engaging in something challenging and creative builds self-esteem, resilience, confidence and a sense of ‘if I can do this, what else can I go?’ It opens up so many more opportunities to people, and, as we heard on multiple occasions, it makes them feel a sense of possibility and optimism about their future.

“We have done a lot of work around trying to build the confidence of young people, including working with care leavers around skills building. There’s a project called Story Explorers, which helps with digital literacy, making films etc. The authors we work with are also very passionate about supporting



Story Explorers – Manchester Literature Festival

young people to follow creative careers. When we work with young people we're not just focussing on writing and reading, we are looking at people's stories and how they communicate. It might be film making, script writing or something else. When we worked on the Racecourse Estate in Sale, for example, the children wanted to do make-up. So, we created a film around zombies and used special effects make-up. It's all co-designed because the young people need to take ownership of it and get into it. We get lots of feedback from families around how it reduces social isolation and builds confidence."

Cathy Bolton, Manchester Literature Festival co-director

"We worked with a women's group in Deeplish Community Centre (Rochdale), and we took the group to where their work was being exhibited in Touchstones Art Gallery. Some of them had lived here for 50 years and have never been into that gallery. It is in walking distance from their homes, and yet they felt that the gallery was not the type of place for them. They felt it was for others."

Hebe Reilly, Creative Director / CEO, Cartwheel Arts

"When somebody joins, they walk through the gallery space which is in the café and they go, 'Well, that's amazing but I'm never going to have my work here'. And you know, six months later they have and we always reflect on that. And they say 'I can't believe my work is here.'"

Jacqui Wood, Chief Executive, Arc

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

The GMCA are currently in the process of reviewing their culture investment approach for April 2026 onwards and to help inform this process we have undertaken data analysis to identify which areas in the city region have the greatest access to culture, as supported by the Greater Manchester Culture Fund.

This examines how easy it is to physically reach venues and organisations that the fund supports. To achieve this, we have created a new measurement called the CED metric. This measurement considers travel times from all areas across GM to cultural organisations. It reflects how easy it is for boroughs across GM to access culture and we have done this by utilising TfGM traffic model data and the funding provided to organisations.

CULTURE EFFECTIVE DENSITY

The metric has been compiled using the statistical software package R and mapping software QGIS. The equation utilised is shown in Equation 1.

Some traffic model zones contain several organisations that receive funding from the GM Culture Fund and, therefore, funding was aggregated for each zone. The decay rate was estimated by using the coefficient of the independent variable of a linear regression where demand was a function of generalised cost.

The CED metric was calculated for both highway and public transport and then combined. Each was

weighted by the proportion of demand from one area to another by each mode and then summed. For example, if 10% of people make the journey between zones by public transport, the public transport CED was multiplied by 0.1 and the highway CED was multiplied by 0.9 before summing.

The key observations from the CED metric are:

Manchester, Salford and Trafford have the highest access to cultural organisations that are supported by the GM Culture Fund. This is to be expected given the transport network enables the greatest access into the central area and also out of it. If all spending was in the peripheral locations of Greater Manchester, the city centre would still have the highest access to culture.

Stockport, Tameside Bolton and Bury all have good access to culture across the city region. There is significant variation within the four boroughs, however, it is clear that areas with strong highway and public transport links to the central conurbation, and around it (i.e. M60), scored more highly. Here the transport network played a significant role rather than just locations that were awarded funding.

Oldham and Rochdale have areas with reasonable access but multiple areas with very low access. Saddleworth and North Rochdale both suffer from poor connectivity and a lack of organisations receiving considerable funding and subsequently suffering from a poor CED score. Arguably Ramsbottom in Bury could be included in this section.

Equation 1 - Calculation of Culture Effective Density calculation

$$CED_o = \sum F_D \times \exp(GC_{OD} \times DR)$$

CED_o = Culture Effective Density at the origin; F_D = GMCSIF allocation to destination zone; GC_{OD} = generalised cost between origin and demand; DR = decay rate

Wigan has the most room for improvement.

Almost the entirety of the borough of Wigan is in the lowest quintiles of the CED metric. This is due to its physical distance from the rest of GM and the levels of culture funding it attracts. This issue, however, will not be solved by simply increasing funding in the borough because of the poor connectivity it faces. A north west metric, that considered its access to culture activities to the west, might see it perform more favourably.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The construction of this metric allows for a more in-depth analysis of the impact of the GM Culture Fund on the wider economy. There is a statistically significant link between employment growth and CED and an even greater relationship with population growth.

While this analysis has identified a correlation rather than causation, the significant relationship between population growth and CED is noteworthy. Regression results can be found in the appendix (Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5).

The CED and population growth correlation suggests that individuals prefer to reside in areas with good access to the organizations funded by the GM Culture Fund. This relationship is likely to be symbiotic, as these organisations are situated in dynamic areas to which they contribute vibrancy.

The connection between employment growth and

CED is weaker and probably reflects the actual role of the GM Culture Fund in generating economic activity. Given the comparatively small scale of funding it provides within the broader economy, it is unlikely to directly generate substantial spending and employment. But by helping to stimulate places and encouraging population growth in key locations, it supports the wider economy.

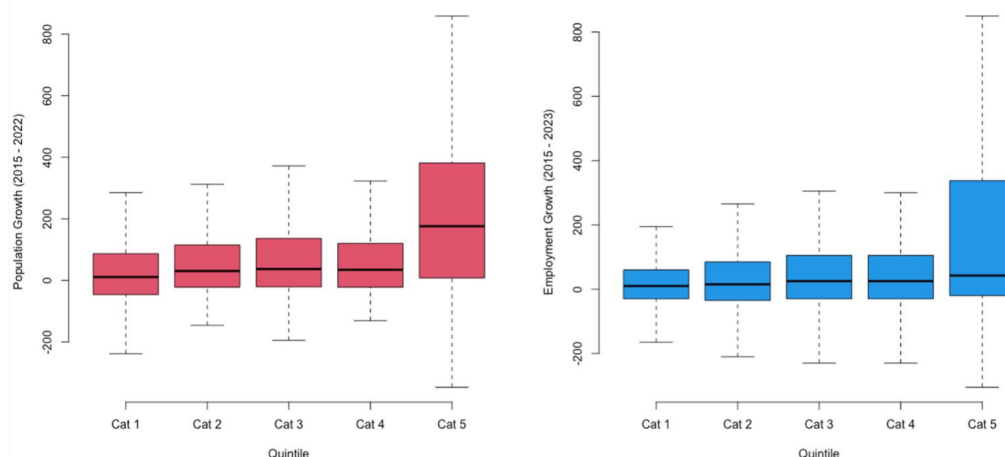
As a result, the relationship between CED and employment growth likely arises from the attraction and retention of economically active individuals in the conurbation due to GM's cultural vibrancy.

A more comprehensive investigation into the relationship between CED and population growth is necessary to establish causation. However, the strength of this relationship, when compared to other variables such as deprivation and employment growth, provides a strong argument that this is a plausible scenario.

Although the relationship between population growth and CED is stronger than that of employment growth, CED's relationship with creative industry employment growth is stronger than all employment growth. This indicates that CED plays a role in supporting creative industry companies.

The GM Culture Fund therefore not only has a clear contributory role in creating vibrant places but also supports a key cluster of employment for GM, as well as supporting the growth of creative industry employers.

Figure 1 – Population and employment growth by CED quintile (2015 - 2023)



Source: RISE calculations, ONS Mid-year population estimates and Business Register of Employment Survey



CASE STUDIES

QUAYS CULTURE, SALFORD

Based at the Lowry Theatre, Quays Culture is a partnership initiative that seeks to animate public spaces and bring extraordinary art into the heart of the community, free of charge. One of their partners is Salford Loaves and Fishes, a day centre for homeless people in Salford.

The centre supports large numbers of homeless people who are either rough sleeping, sofa surfing, living in cars, hostels or temporary accommodation. As part of their work, Loaves and Fishes offer skills building and creativity sessions, and it collaborated with Quays Culture on a project called 'Navvies', which commemorated the 17,000 navvies who dug the Manchester Ship Canal. Highlighting the Irish working-class contribution to Britain's industrial success, it included an audio-visual installation and the creation of the Navvies Garden at Media City.

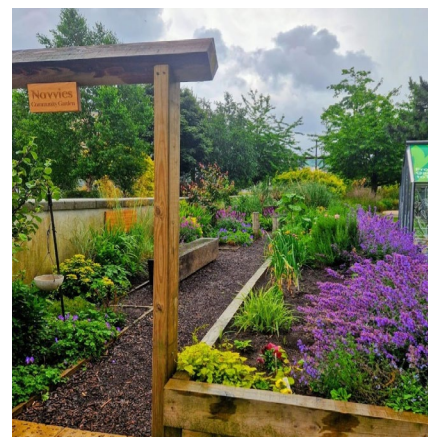
This collaboration had a major impact on the homeless and vulnerable people who took part and were supported by free transport and meal vouchers. It not only helped build their confidence, Jennifer

Anne-Smith, the chief executive officer of Salford Loaves and Fishes, explained, but also gave them a greater sense of belonging.

"They look at the shiny buildings and expensive restaurants [in Salford Quays] and it puts them off. But this project has made them feel welcome and they loved the programme of supporting events. They absorb everything and flourish. The outcomes have been amazing. It's really helped break down barriers and made them feel it's ok to walk into the Lowry."

She added that the partnership was also helping to improve people's mental health and support people on a pathway into employment. *"It's showing people different options and building up their esteem. Two people have since gone to university to study photography and creative writing. It really is incredible what the programme has achieved. It's made them feel special."*

Salford Loaves and Fishes - The Navvies Garden



ODD ARTS, MOSS SIDE, MANCHESTER

Odd Arts are based in Moss Side and deliver theatre workshops across GM. They have a reputation for tackling difficult conversations with their theatre-based programmes and seek to challenge and change attitudes and behaviours. Another key focus is building greater emotional literacy and enabling people to understand the world and themselves differently.

As Rebecca Friel, the chief executive, explains: *“The people we work with are people facing complex challenges, feeling uncertain, fearful, hopeless. In general terms, people with multiple barriers. We work with people in prison. We work with care leavers. We work with children and adults with acute mental health challenges. We work with people facing homelessness. The common denominator is people who’ve experienced inequalities, discrimination and trauma.”*

Odd Arts describe all of their work as restorative,

anti-racist, trauma informed, strengths based, non-violent communication led and considerate of the environment. Fundamental to their work is giving people a better understanding of themselves.

They choose the word ‘beneficiaries’ instead of ‘audiences’ to describe the thousands of people they engage with every year, considering their work to be a conversation and an interaction, facilitated for learning and change instead of a traditional theatre performance. They have a reputation for tackling difficult conversations and they share that expertise across the region working within the community, education, criminal justice, health and corporate training sectors.

The Manchester charity is now seeing extraordinary life transformations following their theatre-based workshops, giving a voice to some of the most marginalised and traumatised members of our communities.





For Friel, this is largely due to the power of theatre. *“Theatre enables two really cool key things,”* she explains. *“It enables you to reimagine and practice an alternative world. Secondly, it also allows you to express the otherwise inexplicable, the things that are too painful and traumatic to talk about. But, if we ask someone to create an image or a mime, they can do that. They can physically show you what fear looks like, or what these really complex subjects look or feel like. They might not have been able to say it. They might not even have the words for it. Theatre takes you to that place.”*

ARC (ARTS FOR RECOVERY) STOCKPORT

Arc (Arts for Recovery) are an arts and cultural organisation who are celebrating 30 years in Stockport this year. They produce transformational arts projects which promote wellbeing and recovery from mental ill-health, engage marginalised groups and reach thousands of people across the region. They offer a broad spectrum of services from free drop-in art sessions for the public to group creative activities for people referred with acute mental health conditions. Jacqui Wood, Chief Executive of Arc argues that variety of creative opportunities they offer is one of their greatest strengths.

“We have programmes that anybody can walk in off the street and take part in,” she explains. “These are very deliberate sort of social drop-ins, trying to address isolation, loneliness, or it’s just a nice space to come in and be creative with other people and have a coffee. You’ve got the exhibition space and people coming in for that. You’ve got the cafe. We have a public programme, so people can book on a pottery workshop or printing or jewellery making. They pay for that and that raises money for the charity, or you can be referred to our other programmes.”

The Arc café is located within The Hat Works in central Stockport, giving them an opportunity to

reach a diverse audience that extends beyond the people who actively engage in their creative offering. As well as being an exhibition space, the cafe provides work experience opportunities for people to build front of house skills in an environment where they feel safe and supported. There are many volunteers and advocates for Arc that started as someone who needed help and are now enthusiastic about sharing their story and encouraging others to get involved.

These day-to-day interactions help the wider public learn more about Arc, building greater awareness and understanding around mental health and neurodiversity. Fundamental to Arc’s success over the years has been creating a space that is genuinely inclusive and welcoming, not just for those they work with, but for those who may be socially isolated.

“We say to the people who are working in our café, ‘Imagine that the person you’re serving, this is the only place they’ve come to this week,’” adds Wood. “We have people who come in who haven’t been participants, particularly older people, but who just come in and they sit and they bring their paper, and they have their scone and cup of tea. And I think, yeah, actually, this is somewhere where you feel you belong.”

HEADSPACE, BOLTON

“Everybody at Headspace has a lived experience of mental illness or neurodivergence, all our directors, everybody, myself included,” explains Ginny Allende, who co-founded Headspace with Stephen Pilling when they went in search of creative opportunities in Bolton and realised there were very few options.

The emphasis at Headspace is on creation, not on a person’s mental health condition or their neurodivergence. They see a completely different shift in how people perceive themselves when they focus on their art, not their diagnosis. Headspace make it clear to the people they work with that they are there to offer a creative space and believe if the focus is on mental health ‘we stop creating’.

“What’s been really interesting in our growth is that people come in telling us, ‘Oh I struggle with this’, and ‘I struggle with that’, and at the end of it they’re saying ‘I want to make a film’ or ‘I want to create a poem.’”

Allende explains that it’s a process that builds resilience as people gain new skills, overcome self-doubt and learn to take constructive criticism and set higher expectations and standards for themselves.

“We recognise that there’s people doing a lot of internal work, personal work, and a lot of external creative work to get the quality out. It’s their work. It’s not our work. Yeah, we’re providing the environment, the space. However, the artists are amazing at doing it themselves, it’s amazing watching some of them just perform magic.”

This is an organisation producing outstanding quality work. Their latest film about Alan Turing will be shown at film festivals across Europe and is narrated by Stephen Fry.

“It’s really important that we employ artists that are extremely good at what they do. And we don’t dumb down. This is not about mental health. This is about creativity. This lived experience doesn’t mean the quality suffers.”

LITTLE READS, MANCHESTER LITERATURE FESTIVAL

When Zara* first came to Little Reads, she was a shy four-year-old girl who had recently arrived in the UK with her family as refugees. Having experienced trauma and upheaval, she was non-verbal and withdrawn.

At first, Zara sat quietly, listening away from the group during the Little Reads sessions. The warmth of the space, the familiar rhythm of stories and the inclusive, welcoming atmosphere created by the facilitator slowly encouraged her participation. The facilitator also used different languages throughout the sessions.

Then her dad sent this: ‘My eldest, she didn’t talk for four weeks properly with people until today. Today she talked in front of everyone. When [the storyteller] asked how do you say hello in another language, she said Namaste. I was so happy.’

From that moment on, Zara and her family came to every Little Reads session. She began to speak more—first in single words, then in short sentences. Her confidence grew, and she developed strong bonds with the facilitator and other children. Her Dad later told us that this experience had a profound effect on Zara’s ability to transition into school. She felt much more comfortable in a group setting, was familiar with books and stories, and already saw herself as someone who belonged in a learning space.

As Zara grew older, she started writing short poems and attending creative writing workshops offered as part of Manchester Literature Festival’s wider programme. The family came to festival events supported by transport costs covered by the Little Reads budget. By the time she was 13, she had performed one of her poems at a school



Manchester Literature Festival Little Reads Audience, Central Library (credit: John Parker Lee)

showcase event—a powerful piece about identity and belonging that left a lasting impression on the audience. Zara went on to join a young people’s writing group at Manchester Poetry Library.

Zara’s journey from silence to poetic expression is a testament to the transformational power of creative, accessible and community-rooted programming. Her story illustrates how sustained, nurturing engagement with literature and the activity associated with it can help children not only find their voice but begin to shape the world around them.

Thanks to continued support from funders, the Manchester Literature Festival have been able to provide a welcoming space for young people like Zara—spaces that nurture creativity, encourage self-expression, and help to build them brighter futures.

**Name has been changed to protect identity.*

CONCLUSIONS

It's frequently said that delivering better outcomes for residents while managing costs is the holy grail of council funding. The Greater Manchester Culture Fund is a great example of this idea put into practice. For the equivalent spend of around 100 metres of high-speed rail track, it delivers high quality arts and culture that reaches over a million people in a region spanning 493 squares miles. Every day, the recipients of this fund empower, inspire and make a difference, helping people into work, supporting them through illness and building confidence and skills.

This report shows that there is an equitable spread across GM of access to the cultural opportunities supported by this Fund. Where there are pockets of lower access, this is driven by both the transport network (often being more rural) and low levels of investment opportunity for the fund. This can be remedied with greater levels of support for existing organisations in these more peripheral areas and urban centres that lack rapid access to the city region's core.

The benefits of the fund are threefold: (i) culture for culture's sake, (ii) economic; and (iii) societal. There is clear evidence that by providing a base level of funding to culture organisations they are then able to reach into other sectors and have a unique and real impact. Without this funding, their business model would be too uncertain and their reach within various other sectors would subsequently be limited or non-existent.

By providing a core fund, while other funding streams are becoming scarcer, the organisations are successfully supporting the economy, unlocking place potential and reaching into other sectors to support their outcomes (i.e. creative health). They are supporting services like the Department for Justice, as well as the Department for Work and

Pensions and local councils' anti-social behaviour teams.

The utilisation of the CED allowed our analysis to validate the claim that investment through this fund is directly supporting creative industry job growth, population growth and is therefore indirectly supporting wider employment growth. By creating attractive and interesting places, the fund is also assuming a crucial placemaking role in attracting people that have proved a boon to the housing and employment market across the city region.

In other sectors the funding is supporting the aims of multiple bodies in ways they couldn't do or afford to do themselves. For example, the Department for Justice has long spoken about preventative methods to stop people entering the court system, but they don't have the necessary reach to achieve this. In one example, we found a theatre helping people in pupil referral units so that today's young drug dealers end up as tomorrow's creative entrepreneurs.

As Paul Hine from Made by Mortals, explained, arts and culture have a unique ability to powerfully connect with people and other public bodies simply can't replicate their approach. *"It's not just about picking up people that are falling through the gaps,"* he points out. *"It's about the arts offering something different. It's much more empowering for someone to share their lived experience through art and see something being created as a result. If you take away the arts you won't have that."*

In conclusion, the arts and culture organisations we engaged with are punching way above their weight, considering the loss of funds most have experienced in recent years. With additional funding they could achieve a lot more – but there is a certainly a strong story to be told about the impact of this fund and the value it brings to our region. It's one that all local tax payers should know about.

APPENDIX

Figure 2 - Population Growth and CED regression

```
Call:
lm(formula = BB$PopGrowth ~ BB$CED)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-1327.49  -105.68   -44.30    50.02   1292.29

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  -1743.4      212.8   -8.191 5.08e-16 ***
BB$CED        1945.0       226.6    8.582 < 2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 190.5 on 1671 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.04221, Adjusted R-squared:  0.04164
F-statistic: 73.65 on 1 and 1671 DF, p-value: < 2.2e-16
```

Source: RISE calculations

Figure 3 - Employment Growth and CED regression

```
Call:
lm(formula = BB$EmpGrowth ~ BB$CED)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-12828.8  -222.5    -86.7     42.1   26003.8

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   -6477      1412   -4.587 4.82e-06 ***
BB$CED         7043       1504    4.684 3.04e-06 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 1264 on 1671 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.01296, Adjusted R-squared:  0.01237
F-statistic: 21.94 on 1 and 1671 DF, p-value: 3.041e-06
```

Source: RISE calculations

Figure 4 - Creative Industry Employment Growth and CED regression

```
Call:
lm(formula = BB$CI_Growth ~ BB$CED)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-807.53  -10.58    -3.31     4.47   1978.25

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)   -418.97      77.41   -5.412 7.12e-08 ***
BB$CED        451.67      82.43    5.479 4.92e-08 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 69.28 on 1671 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.01765, Adjusted R-squared:  0.01706
F-statistic: 30.02 on 1 and 1671 DF, p-value: 4.919e-08
```

Source: RISE calculations

RISE

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