

THE VALUE OF CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

A RESEARCH REPORT BY ARTS & BUSINESS NI
AND PERSPECTIVE ECONOMICS

2025



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INTRODUCTION & FOREWORD



For almost 40 years, Arts & Business NI (A&BNI) has been successfully igniting partnerships between the cultural and private sectors. Year on year we see how creative partnerships breathe new life into businesses, helping them innovate or reach new audiences, revitalise their workforce or engage with local communities. Equally, arts organisations benefit greatly from partnering with businesses, through financial support, broadening their connections and developing their talent.

As we look to the future, we know the arts will continue to play a vital role in the social and economic wellbeing of Northern Ireland; to our businesses, places and communities. However, for the arts in Northern Ireland to thrive, attracting new sources of private investment, as well as increased public investment, is vital.

To help build this case, A&BNI commissioned this report with Perspective Economics to evidence the economic and social value of partnership with the arts, and to measure its impact. It highlights the long-term benefits of financial investment through initiatives like the A&BNI Investment Programme, and the vital role such support plays in building sustainable cross-sector relationships.

The arts uplift and unite; they inspire, spark ideas, and shape vibrant communities. But the findings in this report underscore the need for sustained investment and for current and new partnerships to form - creating not just project value, but economic and social impact across Northern Ireland.

At A&BNI, we're proud to play a part in strengthening Northern Ireland's arts sector alongside our valued members, partners and supporters, but we cannot do it alone. Now is the time for leaders across business, government, and community sectors to champion the arts - to invest, collaborate, and innovate together. By placing creativity at the heart of strategy and decision-making, we can ensure a thriving, resilient Northern Ireland where culture drives opportunity, innovation, and shared pride for the future.

Our work wouldn't be possible without our network of creative and private sector businesses, our valued supporters, and our principal funder, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), and we invite others to join us. Become an Arts & Business NI member and be part of a movement that champions creativity, creates lasting impact, and shapes a more vibrant Northern Ireland for all.

MAEVE MCKERVEY,
Head of Business, Arts & Business NI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2024, Perspective Economics was commissioned by A&BNI to undertake a research study exploring the current state of partnerships between arts and business organisations across Northern Ireland, the role of arts organisations and business in these partnerships, and to estimate the associated economic and social value. The key objectives of the research were to:

- Provide evidence-based insights to support and showcase the benefits of corporate-cultural partnerships.
- Develop a benchmarked baseline for the number, scale and value of such partnerships across Northern Ireland, and assess the impact of the A&BNI Investment Programme¹ in terms of its economic, social and partnership benefits.
- Develop the strategic case for continued and expanded investment in these partnerships.

THE REACH OF ARTS & BUSINESS NI

Arts & Business NI is a creative membership network, established in 1987 to bring together cultural and commercial businesses, helping them grow stronger together through the power of partnership. Arts & Business NI advocates for the value of arts, invests in innovation, and works to ensure that the NI arts and cultural sector has the confidence, capacity, and skills to achieve creative freedom through financial independence.

Arts & Business NI offers training and skills development in areas such as fundraising, governance, leadership and partnership and delivers

specialised programmes such as: ‘Blueprint’ – building financial resilience in the arts; ‘Leaders on Arts Boards’ – delivering board-matching services; and ‘Investment Programme’ – creating sustainable arts and business partnerships via match-funding. These services have extended A&BNI’s reach across Northern Ireland to include A&BNI’s Partnership Ecosystem of 321 organisations (164 arts organisations, and 157 businesses) actively engaged in the last five years. We also find that A&BNI’s business partners businesses collectively employ an estimated 30,000 staff across Northern Ireland.

NORTHERN IRELAND'S ARTS & BUSINESS CONTEXT

- The NI Creative Industries sector (2024) contributes £1.6bn to GVA, with the Cultural Sector delivering £328m, representing 24% growth from the previous year. There are over 700 arts organisations operating across Northern Ireland, supporting an estimated 14,500 active artists.
- Public investment in the arts in Northern Ireland (£5.07 per capita) significantly lags behind Wales (£10.51) and the Republic of Ireland (£21.58) (ACNI). Similar to public levels, we estimate that private investment in the arts equates to only £0.65 per capita in Northern Ireland, compared to £1.39 in Ireland and up to £3.34 per capita in England². Supporting private firms with the confidence to invest is a critical part of tackling this gap.

¹The Arts & Business NI Investment Programme is a competitive match-fund, which supports partnerships between arts organisations and commercial businesses in Northern Ireland.

²Please note there are methodological differences involved in calculating these estimates across geographies. These should be viewed as indicative comparisons only.

WHY DO BUSINESSES INVEST IN THE ARTS?

This research explores the motivation and benefits for businesses investing in arts.

- Based on review of A&BNI Investment Programme responses, we find that businesses primarily partner with the arts to support brand awareness (76%) and create strategic relationships (73%).
- Over half of businesses (52%) also mention Social Value and community impact (52%) as a strong factor in driving partnerships. This can be beneficial for businesses seeking to demonstrate social value within public procurement, as well as shaping their corporate and social responsibility approaches.
- Staff engagement is also cited by 38% of partners, as an increasingly important factor. Businesses report improvements in staff morale, engagement, and professional development.
- For arts organisations, these partnerships can also support innovation in programming (54%) and improve audience engagement (51%). This also supports high satisfaction rates among participants, with significant increases in access to arts activities for diverse audiences.
- Investing in the arts can generate significant commercial returns for business partners: We find evidence of stakeholders reporting footfall increases up to 31%, and sales increases of over 20% during events.

CASE STUDY: IMPACT OF THE A&BNI INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

- The A&BNI Investment Programme supports community outreach, artistic programming, festival sponsorship and various space activation initiatives. Arts partnerships have transformed vacant retail units, public underpasses, and commercial properties into vibrant cultural assets.
- **Total Private Investment:** A&BNI has facilitated £2.4 million in private investment (£1.7m cash, £0.7m in-kind) over the past five years.
- **Investment by Business Size:** Private funding is split between large firms (39%) and Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (61%), with per-employee contributions revealing that whilst large firms contribute more overall, SMEs typically contribute greater proportional volumes to arts sponsorship on a per-employee basis.
- **Financial Leverage:** The A&BNI Investment Programme's £418,450 public investment has helped secure an additional £1.7 million in private funding for Investment Programme participants. This means every £1 of public funding through the A&BNI Investment Programme unlocks £3.91 (rounded to £4) of private sector investment.
- **Partnership Longevity:** 61% of businesses continue to invest in arts partnerships after formal programme participation ends.
- **Audience Development:** Events supported by the A&BNI Investment Programme attracted over 424,000 attendees between 2019-2024.
- **Artist Employment:** Approximately 3,150 paid opportunities were generated for artists through supported projects.



Image: Translink and Seedhead Arts Transform the York Street station underpass

- **Employee Engagement:** Nearly 1,200 business employees directly benefited from partnership activities by taking part in events, with high satisfaction rates among participating employees.
- **Supporting the Festival Economy:** The top ten arts festivals which received sponsorship and were supported by the Investment Programme have a combined annual income exceeding £4 million – highlighting the economic importance of sustaining the festival economy through partnerships.
- **Investment Imperative:** In the current challenging economic climate, maintaining public investment in the A&BNI Investment Programme is critical to sustain the multiplier effect that leverages private funding for the arts.
- **Future-Proofing Skills:** As Northern Ireland's economy evolves, particularly with AI, arts partnerships cultivate increasingly valuable capabilities including creativity, collaboration, and innovation - essential for workforce development.

THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF INVESTING IN THE ARTS

- **Leadership:** The research confirms A&BNI works with most businesses currently investing in arts partnerships, demonstrating their central role in Northern Ireland's cultural and commercial landscape.

These findings demonstrate that A&BNI has built an effective, high-impact network of partnerships that have delivered substantial economic and social value across Northern Ireland. A&BNI has established itself as the primary catalyst and facilitator for business investment in the arts, with the Investment Programme serving as a powerful mechanism for leveraging private support. In the current economic climate, continued public investment in A&BNI's work represents an essential strategic commitment that yields significant returns for Northern Ireland's cultural growth, community wellbeing, and economic development.

KEY FINDINGS

£4:1

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Every £1 of public funding in the A&BNi Investment Programme unlocks £4 of private investment.

76%

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS AND BRANDING

The percentage of businesses reporting a strategic or brand-driven partnership with the arts.

321

ACTIVE ORGANISATIONS ENGAGED WITH A&BNi (AS OF 2025)

£2.4M

TOTAL PRIVATE INVESTMENT

Facilitated by A&BNi (2020-24).

424,000+

EVENT ATTENDEES

People attending Investment Programme supported events.

164

ARTS ORGANISATIONS

157

BUSINESSES

3,150

ARTIST OPPORTUNITIES

Number of artists employed / paid through events supported by Investment Programme partnerships.

54%

INNOVATION IN PROGRAMMING

The percentage of arts organisations reporting innovation in programming as a partnership objective.

61%

PARTNERSHIP LONGEVITY

The percentage of businesses continuing to invest in the arts beyond the Investment Programme.

1,200

EMPLOYEES ENGAGED

Number of staff taking part in partnership events.

100+

NUMBER OF FORMAL PARTNERSHIPS AND PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY A&BNi VIA THE INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

52%

SOCIAL VALUE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

The percentage of partnerships reporting Social Value as an outcome of the investing in the arts.

ABOUT ARTS & BUSINESS NI

Arts & Business NI (A&BNI) is a creative membership network that brings together Northern Ireland's cultural and commercial sectors to grow stronger through the power of partnership. Founded in 1987 and established as an independent charity and company in 2011, A&BNI advocates for the value of arts, invests in innovation, and works to ensure that the NI arts and cultural sector has the confidence, capacity, and skills to achieve creative freedom through financial independence.

A&BNI delivers a range of impactful programmes designed to strengthen the arts sector and foster cross-sector collaboration:

- **Finance & Fundraising:** Skills development for arts organisations, which includes Blueprint, A&BNI's flagship financial resilience programme supporting 29 arts organisations in building long-term sustainability.

”

Blueprint has challenged us to dream big. It's an unprecedented opportunity to bring to life what were previously only aspirational ideas. Through Blueprint investment, mentoring and support, we are investing in a financially sustainable future and creating projects which will connect with our wider community and support the next generation of emerging artists.

”

- **Governance:** Offering training and support for cultural boards, including Leaders on Arts Boards, supported by A&L Goodbody NI, a programme that trains and places aspiring board members to support the arts sector.

”

The Young Leaders on Arts Boards programme has been fundamental to my success in a leadership role, it's widened my horizons, introduced me to new people, experiences and development opportunities.

”

- **Creative Partnerships:** Facilitating innovative connections between the arts and private sector through initiatives such as the Investment Programme, a competitive match fund supported by Arts Council Northern Ireland. The Investment Programme aims to build sustainable long-term relationships. The Investment Programme can award up to £15,000 match-funding, to support a collaboration, helping partners to scale-up ideas. This has catalysed over a hundred long-term partnerships over the years.

”

Simply put, we could not have done this work without the support of Arts & Business NI...

”

INTRODUCTION



14 Image: In Your Space Circus Launch event

In December 2024, Perspective Economics was commissioned by A&BNI to undertake a research study exploring the current state of partnerships between arts and business organisations across Northern Ireland, the role of arts organisations and business in these partnerships, and to estimate the associated economic and social value. The key objectives of the research were to:

- Provide evidence-based insights to support and showcase the benefits of corporate-cultural partnerships.
- Develop a benchmarked baseline for the number, scale and value of such partnerships across Northern Ireland.
- Assess the impact of the A&BNI Investment Programme in terms of its economic, social and partnership benefits.
- Develop the strategic case for continued and expanded investment in these partnerships.

METHODOLOGY

This research explores the motivation and benefits for businesses investing in arts.

- **Review of Programme Monitoring Data:** The research team reviewed partnership data collated by Arts & Business NI over the last five years. This resulted in reviewing over 320 unique arts and business organisations, tagging by variables such as size, location, and sector, and reviewing levels of reported business investment in the arts since 2020/21.

- **Review of Investment Programme evaluation reports:** The research team reviewed 92 evaluation reports collated by A&BNI over the last five years to explore the reported objectives, impacts and benefits of partnerships.
- **Review of Secondary Data and Web Data:** The research team also reviewed over 12,000 NI businesses (with five or more staff) using automated search to review the extent and prevalence of wider funding and partnerships with arts and charitable organisations across Northern Ireland. The team also reviewed additional secondary sources across NI and the UK, including Arts Council NI's Annual Funding Survey, and the Celebrating Creative Partnerships microsite.
- **Direct consultations and engagement with arts and business organisations:** The research team undertook 12 one-to-one interviews with arts and business organisations that had taken part in the Investment Programme or Board Matching programmes with Arts & Business NI, to attain their views on the impact of partnerships, and views on how to improve and enrich partnership participation across NI. Findings from these consultations are presented throughout the report as 'Stakeholder Insights'.

BACKGROUND

This section explores the current number, scale and composition of arts and business organisations across Northern Ireland and considers wider funding and investment trends. There are multiple factors that can shape arts and business partnerships, in recent years, some of these factors have included:

- **Uncertainty caused by COVID-19:** The pandemic created significant disruption, particularly for arts organisations through loss of in-person events, exhibitions, and ultimately – income. Whilst emergency funding and support was made available to arts and business organisations, this impacted opportunities for business sponsorship of the arts. The Arts Council NI Annual Funding Survey 2021 (AFS) estimated that business sponsorship of the arts fell by 55%³ between 2020 and 2021. Business sponsorship (as captured within the AFS) has somewhat recovered but stabilised since COVID-19. This is explored in further detail in subsequent sections.
- **Macroeconomic conditions:** In recent years, the economic landscape has been shaped by inflationary pressures, followed by tighter fiscal and monetary policy e.g. higher interest rates and increased business taxation. This may cause some businesses to re-assess their investment in sponsorships or partnerships. However, it may increase the opportunity for more embedded partnerships, where arts organisations seek to work more closely with business partners, and where businesses recognise the long-term benefits of continuing to work collaboratively with arts organisations and venues – to sustain and grow.

- **Public investment in the arts:** The sustained pressure on public investment in the arts in Northern Ireland is a well-recognised challenge. ACNI (2023) estimates that Northern Ireland spends £5.07 per capita on arts funding, compared to £10.51 in Wales and £21.58 in the Republic of Ireland. In real terms, this continues to place significant pressure on arts organisations, and – as explored later – may directly limit the growth potential of not only the creative industries, but also tourism, hospitality, retail and construction. This is also compounded by factors such as single-year funding awards, which can inhibit organisational capacity and ability to fundraise or expand operations for longer-term sustainability.

The arts are also of critical importance for helping to retain and attract people to live and work in Northern Ireland, as well as having real applications in areas such as preventative healthcare, restorative justice, youth skills and training, and how Northern Ireland is viewed around the world.

Ultimately, ensuring sufficient public investment in the arts is a prerequisite for driving sustained private investment in the arts. Schemes such as the A&BNi Investment Programme demonstrate a clear return on public investment – as explored in this report.

³Arts Council NI AFS (2021) Findings: Available at https://artscouncil-ni.s3-assets.com/AFS_2021_Findings_Summary_Release_Report_FINAL.pdf#:~:text=%E2%80%A2%20Legacy%20of%20emergency%20grant,lockdown%20Other%20UK%20public%20sources

Whilst conditions remain challenging for many organisations, there are also areas of opportunity that give reason for optimism. Opportunities include:

- **Encouraging high-growth, scale-up businesses to engage with the arts:** Scale-up businesses, particularly in the technology and professional services sectors, present significant partnership potential. These organisations often seek distinctive ways to establish their brand identity and culture, making them natural fits for innovative arts partnerships. We explore these in latter case studies.
- **Animating new venues, spaces, and places:** The demand and usage of public spaces has changed significantly in recent years. Arts organisations in NI are particularly strong in animating, rejuvenating and reusing spaces and places. This might involve use (or re-use) of new venue spaces, temporary installations in vacant retail spaces, creative use of corporate environments, and the animation of public realm. The creativity and vision to animate spaces can contribute to driving economic growth and tackling disadvantage. As such, several businesses and organisations can work closely with arts organisations to enhance and sustain spaces.
- **Harnessing community and interest:** Arts partnerships can thrive when businesses recognise their role as community members. Businesses can actively support community festivals and events aligned to their own ethos and corporate social responsibilities, whilst helping to promote their business and grow market reach. Further, businesses are often comprised of owners and employees with their own interests and passions for the arts. There is often untapped and unrecognised potential in these personal connections to the arts - from musicians to theatregoers, and readers to dancers. By uncovering and nurturing these,

businesses can develop more meaningful arts partnerships that align with their people's passions – and go beyond financial sponsorship.

- **Attracting, retaining, and engaging workforces:** Arts partnerships can also offer unique opportunities for employee engagement and development. This can include creative workshops, competency development, board matching, and wellbeing initiatives that help organisations attract and retain talent.

This research report explores how investment in the arts can represent an investment in Northern Ireland's economy and society. Conversely, a reduction in investment may lead to reduced opportunities, venue and festival closures, and diminished living and working conditions for not only the creative sector – but for Northern Ireland as a whole.

THE ARTS AND BUSINESS LANDSCAPE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

This section explores the wider estimates for the number of active arts and business organisations operating in Northern Ireland. This is important, as it provides a baseline regarding the definition, size and scale, and potential for partnership activity. It also enables comparative analysis and context for recommendations.

For arts organisations

- Arts organisations can be highly diverse in their composition, structure, and focus. For example, several arts organisations may have dual charitable and commercial focus (e.g. an arts festival with box office income, that focuses on ensuring affordable access to events). This also means that their income can come from a range of sources, including applying for public funding (e.g. via the Arts

Council or local government), earned income, sponsorship, donations, trusts and foundations, or fundraising. Not all arts organisations are in receipt of public funding; others can be run as commercial or social enterprises.

- Typically, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland will support between 80 and 100 arts organisations annually with direct funding.
- In the last five years, we estimate that A&BNI has supported or worked with 164 unique arts organisations, through match-funding, training and 1-to-1 support.
- However, wider review of registered business (Companies House) and charitable organisations (Charity Commission NI) data suggests that there are over 700 arts organisations active in NI⁴, including funded and non-funded organisations such as arts venues, spaces, collectives and festivals. This research also estimates there are over 14,500 active artists across NI.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) also undertakes annual estimates for the size of the 'Creative Industries' across the UK. The most recent data (2024) suggests that:
 - There are c. 3,695 organisations in the Creative Industries in Northern Ireland. This includes firms in the Cultural Sector (e.g. arts, music, photography and crafts – c. 1,130 firms), as well as firms with creative focus (such as architecture, design, IT, and publishing).
 - The NI Creative Industries sector contributed an estimated £1.6bn to GVA in 2022, of which the Cultural Sector contributed an estimated £328m.

- The data suggests that whilst Northern Ireland's cultural sector has grown by 24% in the most recent year (from £264m to £328m); the last decade has been highly constrained, and subject to significant annual variation, with the NI cultural sector only growing from £308m to £328m (+6%) between 2010 and 2022 (compared to 44% across the UK).
- This means that the arts sector has faced a challenging decade; arts organisations are arguably facing higher levels of underinvestment, may require support to access and sustain commercial sponsorship and income, but may also have higher long-run potential if supported to grow.

For businesses in Northern Ireland

- As of 2024, the Inter-Departmental Business Register⁵ estimates there are 80,045 VAT and or PAYE registered businesses operating in Northern Ireland. An estimated 4,855 firms (6%) of these firms work directly in 'arts, entertainment, recreation and other services.'
- However, Northern Ireland is typically a 'small business' economy. Of these firms, 89% can be classified as micro (0-9 employees), followed by 9% small (10-49 employees). There are only 1,380 medium businesses (50-249 employees) and 345 large businesses (over 250 staff).

⁴ Arts Council NI (2024) Working and Living Conditions of Artists <https://artscouncil-ni.org/resources/working-and-living-conditions-of-artists-in-ni>

⁵ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/current-publication-and-idbr-tables-1>

- There are advantages and variations in how businesses of various sizes can engage with arts partnerships. Whilst larger firms may have size and scale to be able to provide financial sponsorship or partner with arts organisations, they can also often have contesting pressures (e.g. require board level approvals or have a 'selected' partner each year). Smaller firms may often have fewer direct resources but may have greater agility and ability to work with arts organisations more directly – often providing a higher proportion of investment into the arts.
- Further, the composition of these businesses also highlights how:
 - 60% are registered businesses, 35% are sole traders (which may be less likely to participate in partnerships) and 4% are non-profit bodies or mutual associations.
 - The remainder (<1%, 215 businesses) include public bodies, government or-rganisations, and local authorities. These can be important organisations that may work with arts organisations for areas such as health, public realm, and social projects.
- This highlights the importance of recognising the breadth of organisations across Northern Ireland – there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach for if, why, and how businesses choose to engage with the arts sector.

Stakeholder Insight: The Value of Connections and Ideas

Whilst large-scale partnerships can receive more media or public attention, many stakeholders highlighted how smaller initiatives also provided significant value. These lighter touch engagements (e.g. a staff workshop) can be particularly valuable for organisations engaging with the arts, offering accessible entry points without requiring substantial initial investment, and building a pipeline for longer-term partnerships.

PRIVATE INVESTMENT INTO THE ARTS

Arts organisations often rely upon multiple sources of income, including box office and ticket sales, venue and bar income, as well as public funding, and wider forms of donations, fundraising and sponsorship. There are several surveys that help to track this income and expenditure over time, typically within funded arts organisations such as the Arts Council England's Private Investment in Culture survey, and in Northern Ireland – the Arts Council NI's Annual Funding Survey.

This section considers the volume, value, and trends shaping private investment into the arts. Please note that often these studies may not be fully comparable due to differences in methodology and may have some time lag. However, they provide an indication of the scale of investment currently undertaken.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the Annual Funding Survey (2023/24) tracks income and expenditure among arts organisations funded by the Arts Council NI. In the most recent year (2023/24), it estimates that, based on responses from 84 organisations, their total income was approximately £56.3m, of which:

- £24.5m (Earned Income)
- £12.7m (ACNI Funding)
- £14.7m (Other Public Funding and Capital Income)
- £3.1m (Trusts and Foundations)
- £1.2m (Sponsorship and Donations)

For this analysis, we focus on sponsorship and donations below.

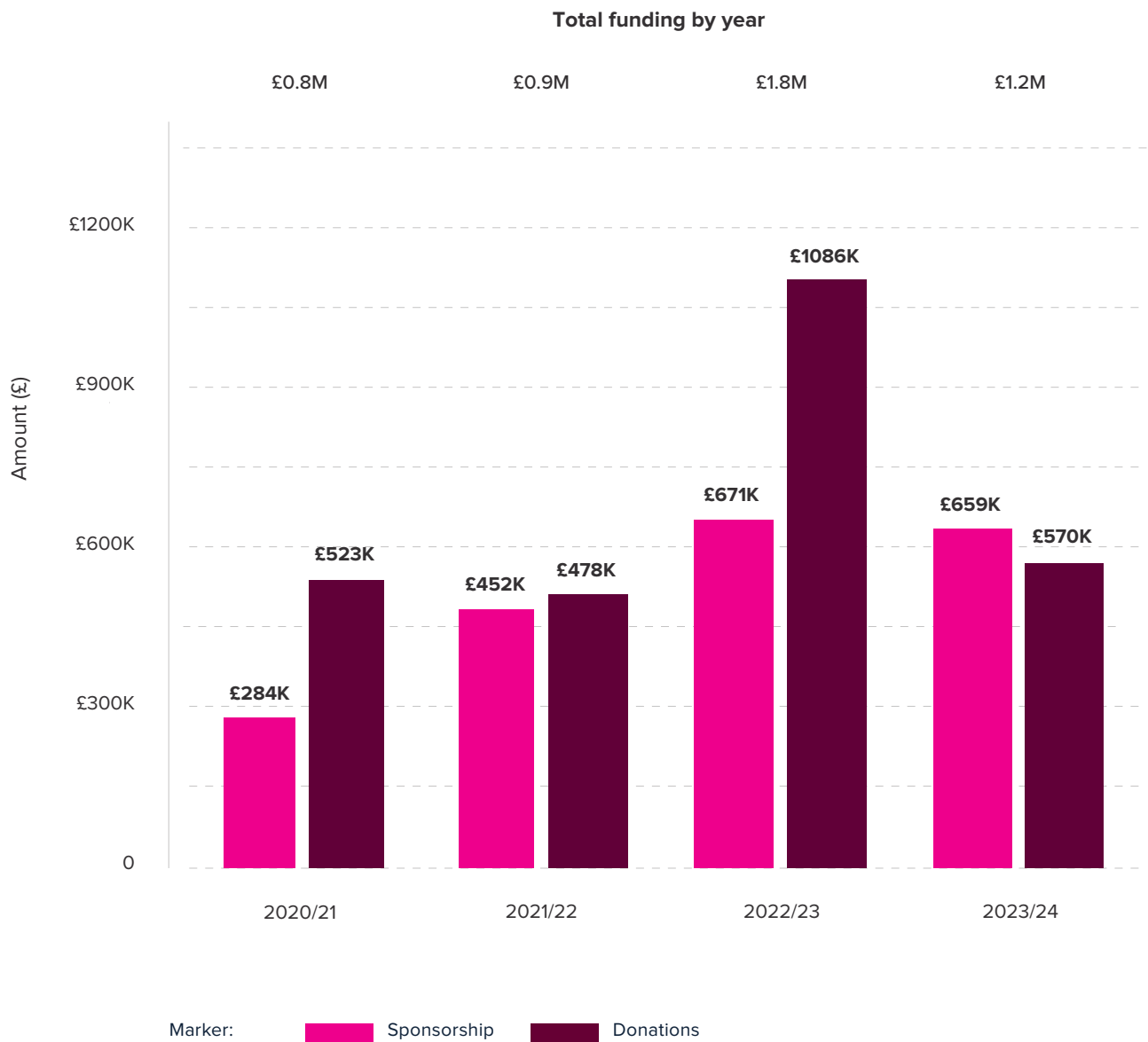
Figure 1 sets out the value of sponsorship and donations over the last four years (as reported by the AFS). From 2020/21 to 2023/24, the number of arts organisations reporting sponsorship has increased from 22 to 35, with the value increasing from £284k to £659k in this time period. However, much of this may be due to resumption of events following COVID-19 lockdowns. Further, sponsorship levels may have 'levelled off' between 2022 – 2024.

This chart also shows the importance of donations to arts organisations, with £2.7m donated over the last four years (£570k in 2023/24). Donations may vary year-to-year as these may include corporate or individual donations, or additional donations made as part of box office. Ensuring arts organisations can access and avail of Gift Aid through enabling capacity may also be an important determinant of increasing aggregate donations.



Image: Frankie Magilligan performs at A&BNI event. Aaron McCracken photography.

FIGURE 1: SPONSORSHIP AND DONATIONS TO THE ARTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: ACNI Annual Funding Survey (2023/24) – reported income from sponsorship and donations (base sizes: 2020/21 (sponsorship, n = 22, donations, n = 46), 2021/22 (n = 30, n = 53), 2022/23 (n = 34, n = 57), 2023/24 (n = 35, n = 42).

United Kingdom: The Arts Council England explores investment levels in its Private Investment in Culture Survey (2025)⁶. It estimates that, in 2023/24, total ‘contributed income’ in the not-for-profit creative and cultural sector in England is estimated at £463 million, of which:

- £153m (33%) in income from individuals.
- £266m (57%) from trusts and foundations.
- £46m (10%) in corporate giving⁸.

Whilst not directly comparable, this provides some insight into the levels of investment in England. Segmented by ACE region⁹ (2023/24), it also suggests that private investment in the arts is highest in London (42%, n=£192m), followed by the ‘Midlands’ (7%), the ‘North’ (19%), the South East (23%), and the South West of England (9%).

This research also highlights that whilst 43% of English arts organisations had received corporate sponsorship or donations, this figure is higher in

London (48%) than regions such as the North West, North East or Yorkshire and the Humber (34%). This highlights the regional and annual variability of private investment in the arts – areas such as London may have outlier levels of investment (e.g. from large corporate or wealthy individual benefactors); others such as the North regions may have more structural comparability to the NI economy.

Ireland: In 2024, Business to Arts estimate private investment in the arts in Ireland reached €8.4m (cash and in-kind)¹⁰.

Comparison: While not fully comparable given definitions and data sources are varied, the table below compares corporate sponsorship and donation estimates between NI, England, and Ireland on a per capita basis. Comparable data for Wales was not identified and therefore was not included in this comparison.

Region / Country	Value	Per Capita
Northern Ireland	£1.2m (2023/24) ¹¹	£0.65
Ireland	€8.4m (2024)	€1.67 (£1.39)
England	£199m (2024) ¹²	£3.34

Source: ACE, ACNI, Perspective Economics

⁶ Arts Council England (2025) Private Investment Survey <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/private-investment-culture-survey-2025-report>
⁷ Equivalent to ‘private investment’ in previous Private Investment in Culture Survey reports.
⁸ Figures taken for more representative group (excluding super-major organisations) as per pg.14.
⁹ https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Map_area_boundaries.pdf
¹⁰ Business to Arts (2024) ‘Investing in Culture: How Irish Arts Partnerships Are Driving Community and Corporate Impact in 2024’ Available at: <https://www.businesstoarts.ie/why-business-to-arts/insights/investing-in-culture-how-irish-arts-partnerships-are-driving-community-and-corporate-impact-in-2024>
¹¹ Includes sponsorship plus donations.
¹² Includes income from individuals and corporate giving as per 2025 PICS figures.

This data highlights that:

- Levels of private investment in the arts equated to only 65p per capita in Northern Ireland in 2023/24.
- Levels of private investment in the arts (measured via sponsorships and donations) in England as a whole are approximately five times higher than seen in Northern Ireland (per capita). Private investment in the arts in Northern Ireland (per capita) is approximately half the level in the Republic of Ireland.

This **per capita disparity** may reflect several factors. Northern Ireland historically has had lower levels of arts funding overall, and its smaller philanthropic community and business base may limit the scale of private contributions. There are proportionately fewer large and medium companies headquartered in NI and fewer high-net-worth individuals donating to the arts, which lowers the per capita average.

- Further, the current data highlighting private investment in the arts also demonstrates significant structural challenges for arts organisations, such as a relatively small and concentrated pool of private funders, and concentration among certain geographies and sectors.

- However, it is also important that arts and culture are available to all organisations and people – encouraging a larger number of participants to make (relatively) small contributions could go a long way to grow private investment in the arts. We explore this further in latter sections on a company-level basis in Northern Ireland.

We also note that not all arts organisations will be covered by these surveys. As such, we explore partnership data tracked in Northern Ireland by A&BNI in the next section.

MAPPING ARTS AND BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

INTRODUCTION

Arts & Business NI has facilitated hundreds of collaborations in recent years, helping companies integrate the arts into their strategy, and supporting arts organisations to develop and grow. In early 2025, the research team undertook a mapping exercise to identify arts and business organisations involved in partnerships, and or attending events.

Review of A&BNI data highlights 321 unique organisations actively collaborating over the last five years (2019/20 to 2023/24).

FIGURE 2: MEMBERSHIP AND ENGAGEMENT WITH ARTS AND BUSINESS NI



Source: Source A&BNI monitoring data. N= 321 organisations

The data highlights a well-balanced network of 321 organisations, comprising 164 arts organisations, and 157 businesses. This distribution between arts and business partners suggests a healthy ecosystem where both sectors demonstrate active levels of engagement and membership.

Within the arts sector, we classify organisations by their key offering. The data suggests that Music & Opera (27), Theatre & Drama (25), and Festivals

& Events (24) represent the largest categories, with Visual Arts & Photography (20) and Community Arts & Education (16) also forming substantial groups. The remaining areas demonstrate the breadth of the arts sector engaged with A&BNI, spanning from venues, ballet, circus arts, film & cinema, and a small number of non-profits and advisory firms for the wider arts sector.

Levels of business participation by sector type is also diverse. The data suggests that Professional Services firms (27) have the highest level of involvement, with Hospitality & Tourism (16) and Retail & Shopping (16) also well represented. Technology & IT businesses (12) have a notable presence, alongside Real Estate & Construction (10) and marketing and advertising firms (10). The spread across sectors highlights how arts partnerships can have relevance across different parts of the economy.

For the 157 businesses identified, review of accounts and presence in Northern Ireland suggests a combined local workforce of c. 30,000 FTEs, and a mix of firms by overall size, with 26% large firms (250+ FTEs), 18% medium (50-249 FTEs), 22% small (10-49 FTEs), and 34% micro (1-9 FTEs). This highlights that businesses of all sizes are engaged and actively participating with A&BNI.

LOCATION

Review of Arts & Business NI membership and partner data highlights that, while Belfast shows the highest concentration of participating organisations (105 arts and 97 businesses representing 63% of organisations), there are also a significant number of partnerships (37%) based outside of Belfast across the region.

For example, Derry City and Strabane is an important hub for partnerships with 17 arts organisations and 16 businesses involved, demonstrating strong engagement in the North West.

Areas such as Ards and North Down, and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon also show areas with notable levels of sub-regional engagement and highlights how arts and business activity is spread across Northern Ireland. The data also highlights some areas with more pronounced levels of business engagement compared to arts organisations – for example, Newry, Mourne and Down shows stronger business activity (6) than arts engagement (1), while Antrim and Newtownabbey demonstrates similar patterns (9 businesses, 4 arts organisations) – signal how businesses may work and partner across Northern Ireland beyond their registered or main base.

The geographic spread demonstrates that significant engagement and opportunity across Northern Ireland. This regional distribution is important for ensuring equitable access to partnership opportunities and highlights sustained scope to strengthen engagement across the region.

WIDER INVOLVEMENT WITH THE ARTS

The research team also sought to identify wider partnerships and engagement with the arts beyond the members and partnerships held by A&BNI. This process involved identifying approximately 12,000 businesses active in Northern Ireland with five or more staff (firms with fewer than five staff were excluded due to sample size).

An automated web search process was undertaken to identify where companies mentioned any form of partnership or investment with arts organisations. This process identified a further 100+ active businesses that had engaged with arts organisations via sponsorship or educational awards. Based on the overall monitoring data and wider review of businesses across Northern Ireland, this suggests two key findings:

- Arts & Business NI appear to engage with the majority of businesses and organisations (c. 325) currently partnering for the arts.
- We estimate that up to c. 500 private organisations across Northern Ireland may have participated in engaging with the arts. This suggests that A&BNI currently supports the majority of active partnerships between arts organisations and businesses across Northern Ireland, but that there are also opportunities for more business organisations across NI to consider arts partnership.

Image: Beannchor and Hit the North, Investment Programme Partnership. Artwork by Slim Safont



MEASURING THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIPS

Arts & Business NI has facilitated hundreds of partnerships in recent years between arts organisations and businesses, most notably through its Investment Programme. The research team has conducted a review of monitoring data and almost one hundred evaluation reports from the Investment Programme, which provide extensive insight into how partnerships have evolved, and how projects have benefitted the arts sector, businesses, and the wider economy. The team has also conducted over a dozen one-to-one consultations with partners to explore the benefits and value of partnerships.

Stakeholder Insight:
Taking a Long-Term Approach to Partnership

When asked about how partnership supports their commercial activity, most businesses suggested that arts partnerships were part of a wider, more patient approach to growth, as well as in many cases, being viewed internally as *‘the right thing to do’*. In other words, the benefits from partnerships are highly welcome, but are often not the main determinant for partnerships. These can be driven simply due to business owners’ personal support for the arts, or willingness to improve their local community through the medium of the arts.

Some businesses stressed this long-term and collaborative approach, with one professional services firm stating that *“We don’t view it as directly supporting new streams of work, but rather – some of our clients work closely with Arts & Business NI. We post about our partnerships, and our clients love working with them too.”*

WIDER INVOLVEMENT WITH THE ARTS

Since 2019/20, the A&BNI Investment Programme has invested over £418,450 in direct financial support in matched funding for shared projects between arts and business organisations, helping to unlock a further £1.7m of private sector investment in the arts (see ‘Unlocking Investment in the Arts’ section for further detail).

There has been extensive demand among arts and business organisations to take part in the Investment Programme, as it provides an opportunity to bring together like-minded organisations, share in projects that can benefit both organisations and the wider community, and provides financial support for growth. We have reviewed 92 projects between 2019/20 to 2023/24 that have received financial support from the Investment Programme. Each project sets out its objectives, and a short evaluation form is completed that explores the outputs, benefits, and feedback from both partners. The research team has reviewed each summary, and analysed the key outputs, outcomes and impact mentioned by partnerships. We find strong evidence of positive impacts generated for arts organisations, businesses, and wider economic and social impact.

In summary, this includes:

- Businesses which have had arts projects supported by the Investment Programme (£418,450) have subsequently invested an estimated £1,746,633 in arts projects since 2020, an effective return on investment of over £4 for every £1 of funding.
- The Investment Programme seeks to build new partnerships and support long term partnerships that continue beyond initial funding. Review of Arts & Business NI data suggests that 61% of businesses supported by the programme have either continued to provide sustained financial support to the arts or have increased this funding outside of the programme.

- The Investment Programme has supported projects and events with a combined attendance of over 424,000 over the last five years. The projects have helped to grow and support festival attendances, support family-friendly events, educational activities, and community outreach.
- The evaluation reports estimate that up to 3,150 paid opportunities have been generated for artists in Northern Ireland through the projects supported, and almost 1,200 business employees have directly benefitted from taking part in events supported by the projects.
- All projects supported through the Investment Programme have received positive feedback from arts organisations and businesses alike.

We explore key areas below, including how arts and business organisations undertake partnerships, including sectors and type of projects delivered; what partnerships aim to achieve (via objectives); the outputs and outcomes of projects (within the Investment Programme); and the benefits for the arts, businesses, and society.

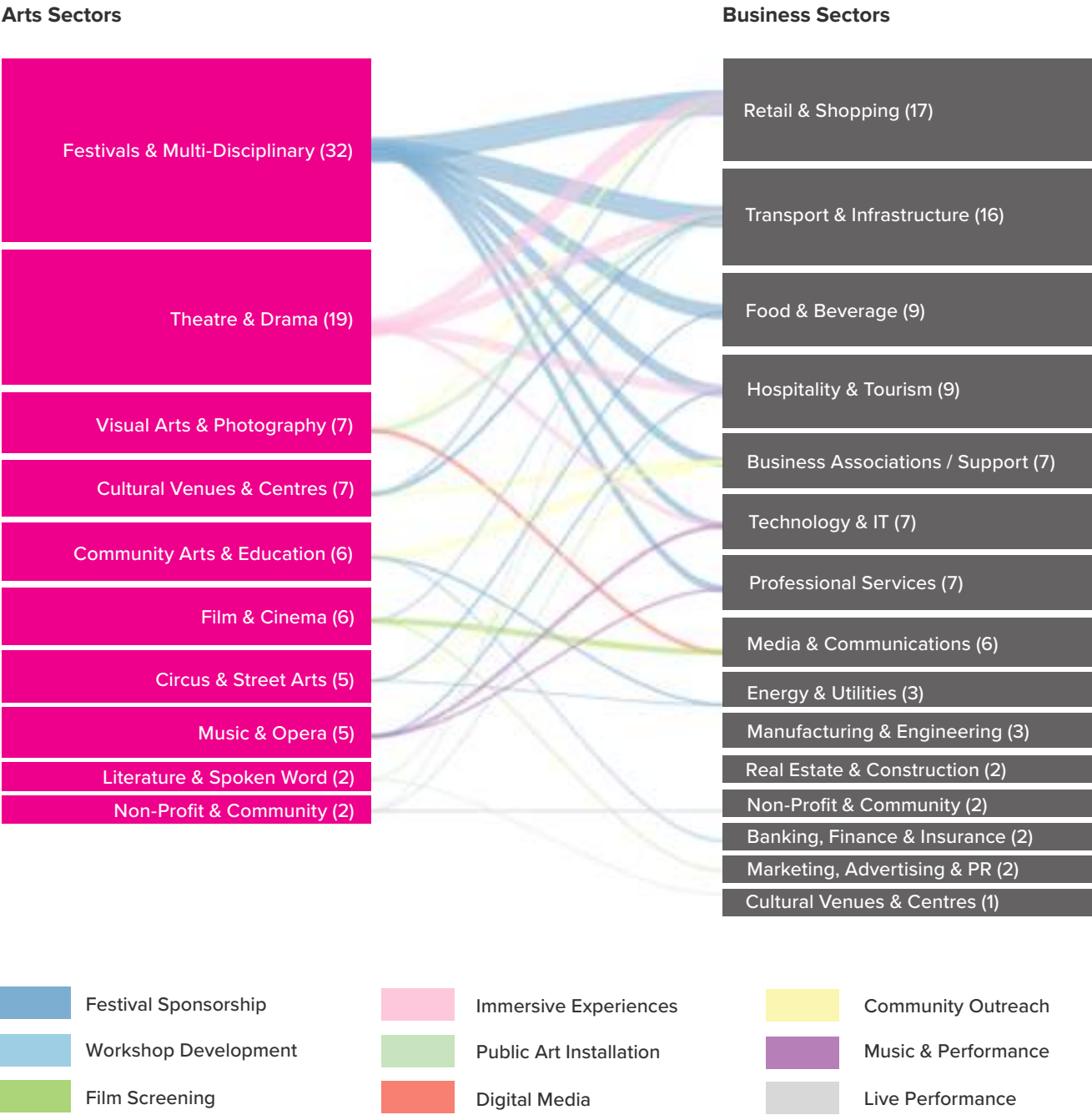
PARTICIPATION IN THE INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

We examine participation by 57 unique businesses and 51 arts organisations across the 92 projects. As shown below, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to partnerships; we find a wide range of sectors collaborating, such as festivals and arts events working with retailers, transport, food and drinks, and hospitality firms; and theatre groups working with shopping centres and IT firms. This data highlights the perceived value of partnering to deliver experiential events and to bring people together. The flow lines also highlight the type of projects undertaken within partnerships.

Stakeholder Insight: Finding the Right Fit

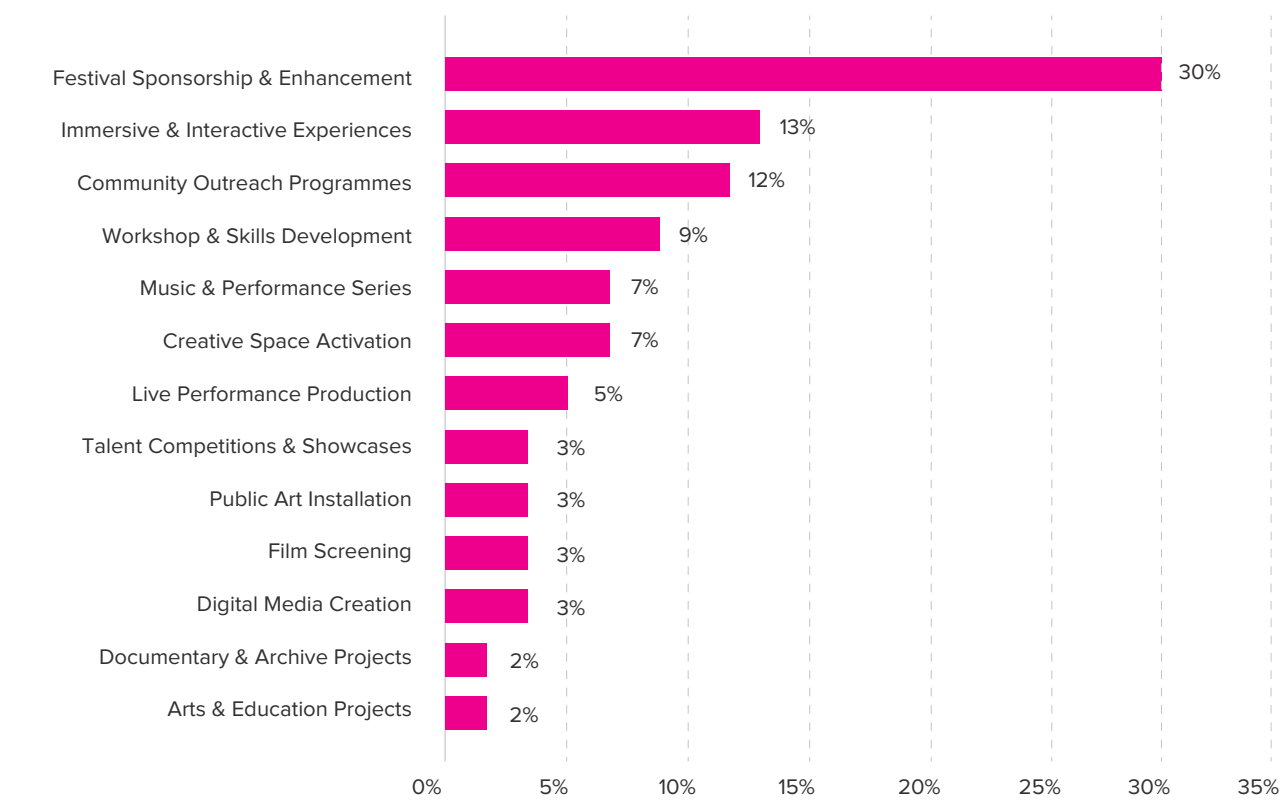
Several stakeholders from both arts and business organisations emphasised that partnerships are not solely about the financial commitment, and that ‘good partnerships don’t start with money – they require an organic nature’. Stakeholders recognised the need for finding the ‘right fit and match’ between arts and business organisations, and that partnerships can work well within a strategic setting, in that both organisations should be seeking to address a problem or find a solution to a new area.

FIGURE 3: NUMBER OF PROJECTS AND COUNT OF PARTNERS BY SECTOR CLASSIFICATION



The flow lines highlight the type of projects undertaken by partnerships and are also summarised below. The review of the programme highlights the breadth of projects undertaken, with thirteen types of projects identified.

FIGURE 4: TYPE OF PROJECTS SUPPORTED THROUGH THE INVESTMENT PROGRAMME



Source: Arts & Business NI Investment Programme Projects (2019 – 24)

This includes festival sponsorship (and wider support) which is the most frequent type of support provided by businesses (30% of projects), with businesses including a range of retailers, transport, food and drink firms, hospitality, and professional services.

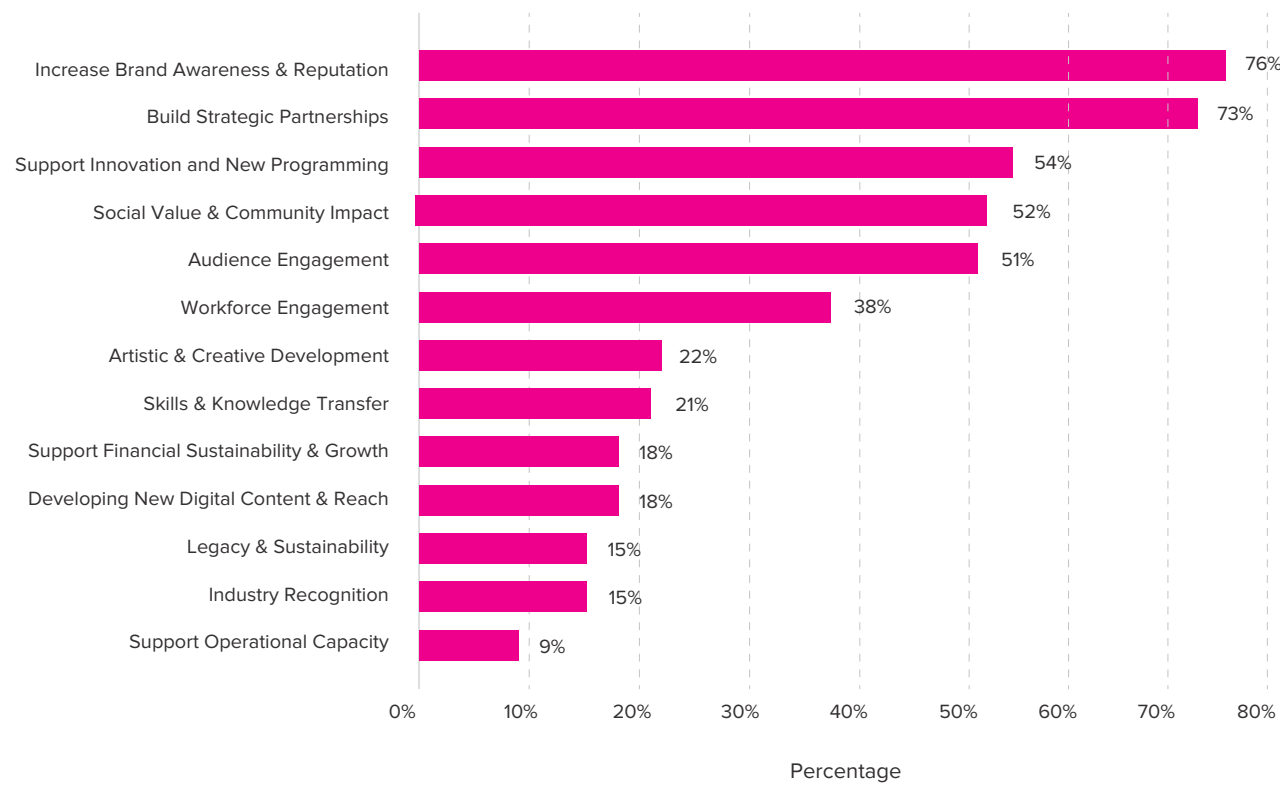
There are also a range of immersive and interactive experiences, where businesses can partner with arts and theatre groups to develop educational and family friendly events (e.g. Dale Farm, Grand Opera House, and Pintsized Productions collaborating on farm safety). Businesses can also collaborate more directly with the arts sector to support community outreach projects (12%), enabling direct social value and partnership.

There are also opportunities for partnerships in wider areas. For example, many projects cite the use of workshops and skills development within their own workforce (e.g. encouraging staff to take part in artistic forms to encourage creativity and expression). The arts can also be a powerful tool for supporting the activation and renewal of spaces; there are several examples of businesses working with local arts organisations to renew, refresh, and revitalise spaces through forms such as street art or outdoor events.

WHAT DO PARTNERSHIPS AIM TO ACHIEVE?

Each applicant to the Investment Programme sets out what they aim to achieve, and the overall objectives of the project. The analysis of project summaries reveals clear priorities and ambition amongst partners, with almost seven hundred objectives mentioned across the 92 projects.

FIGURE 5: OBJECTIVES MENTIONED BY INVESTMENT PROGRAMME PARTICIPANTS



Source: A&BNI Investment Programme Projects (2019 – 24)

The data highlights that increasing brand awareness and reputation is a primary business objective, mentioned within 76% of partnerships. This demonstrates that collaboration with arts organisations can be a valuable tool for enhancing corporate visibility and public perception, and several businesses highlight how projects have increased their brand visibility and impressions across Northern Ireland.

Building strategic partnerships is equally as important for organisations (73%), reflecting strong interest in developing relationships that deliver mutual benefits beyond individual projects, and that can be harnessed over time. In many cases, there may already be an initial partnership in place (e.g. board membership, or minor sponsorship); the Investment Programme often acts as a catalyst to increase the scale and depth of the partnership through a direct project.

Over half (54%) of partnerships mention supporting innovation or new programming, and audience engagement (51%). The funding and support from commercial partners can often help to provide a mechanism for innovation among both partners, either through a new arts form, or by undertaking a project the commercial partner may not have previously considered. Further, in the case of festivals and arts programming, this funding can allow for new programming, growth in box office, and help both organisations to grow and scale.

Social Value and community impact (52%) is also a strong factor in driving partnerships. This can be beneficial for businesses seeking to demonstrate social value within public procurement, as well as shaping their corporate and social responsibility approaches.

Almost two fifths of partnerships highlight benefits for staff engagement and development as a key motivation for engaging (38%). The significance of staff engagement and development is further highlighted by quantitative data presented at the outset of this section, which shows that almost 1,200 business employees have directly benefitted from taking part in partnership activities, and that partnership evaluations consistently show high satisfaction rates among participating employees.

A range of wider objectives are also cited, such as advancing artistic and creative development (22%), and skills and knowledge transfer across arts and business organisations (21%). These partnership objectives demonstrate the breadth and strategic nature of arts and business relationships across Northern Ireland. While brand visibility and strategic relationships are essential, the range of objectives shows how partnerships seek to undertake valuable projects that go beyond traditional sponsorship.

The objectives also suggest that the Investment Programme can support both commercial objectives whilst simultaneously supporting artistic growth, community engagement, and innovation. It also highlights that many businesses increasingly recognise arts partnerships as direct strategic tools rather than philanthropic activity, offering tangible returns across marketing, social responsibility, innovation, and workforce development.

We explore the impact and reported benefits of these partnerships for arts and business organisations below.

Stakeholder Insight:
Encouraging the Unexpected

Both arts and business respondents emphasised the value of unexpected outcomes that emerged through partnerships. One business described how one of the Investment Programme projects *"came from casual conversations during a school pick-up, that then evolved into a strategic project."* These unplanned collaborations were often cited as particularly valuable, suggesting that creating spaces for informal interaction between sectors can be valuable. Arts & Business NI programmes that facilitate networking were recognised for *"creating conditions where innovation can happen."*

WHAT CAN PARTNERSHIPS ACHIEVE?

The research team has reviewed multiple sources including monitoring data, project evaluation forms, and one-to-one consultations to explore how partnerships can deliver tangible outcomes for both arts and business organisations.

For the 92 projects within the Investment Programme that have completed evaluation forms, we find strong evidence of positive outputs and outcomes for arts organisations, businesses, and wider society and economy.

The word cloud below sets out the top twenty outcomes mentioned by project summaries as a result of the Investment Programme.

The majority of projects confirm the development of a strategic partnership (76%) that may be able to continue or become embedded between organisations. Most projects (75%) also confirm increased brand visibility and media coverage for both organisations. We also find strong evidence of increased footfall and visitor numbers for arts and business organisations (mentioned by 57%), also leading to revenue growth (39%) and the transformation of spaces (39%).

This also highlights the breadth of benefits to both parties and wider society. We explore some of these quantified benefits in more detail below, including direct examples and feedback from project participants.

FIGURE 6: WORD CLOUD: OUTCOMES REPORTED BY PROJECTS



Outcomes Achieved

Examples

Brand Visibility
& Media Coverage

Sponsorship of arts events and partners can enable increased brand visibility and recognition. Several arts organisations will promote events to hundreds of thousands of individuals via digital and traditional media– and sponsorship can enable firms to include their brand and recognition in support.

Some notable quantified benefits mentioned in projects include:

- “95% of festival attendees recognised [company] as a key sponsor.”
- “Our branding featured in print media and festival programme (25,000 publications).”
- Translink and Oh Yeah – Metro Sessions as part of the Sound of Belfast Festival... “[generated] an advertising value equivalent of £229,686”

Measurable Footfall
& Visitor Increases

Arts and cultural events serve as catalysts for increasing footfall and visitor numbers to both venues and surrounding areas. By supporting festivals, events, exhibitions, and performances, businesses can directly benefit from increased customer traffic and heightened visibility, particularly with areas such as retail and transport.

Partnership data demonstrates significant spikes in attendance and visitation during arts events, with many businesses reporting double-digit percentage increases in footfall that translate to measurable commercial benefits. For example, **Sound of Belfast¹³ dates saw - 21,502+ attendees engaged** across the performance series, contributing to increased footfall and placemaking for Victoria Square. Victoria Square reported **higher weekend dwell times** and positive shopper feedback during activation periods.

Further, review of the 92 projects suggests a combined physical attendance of over 420,000 people to events and festivals supported by the Investment Programme.

¹³ <https://soundofbelfast.com/>

Activating &
Transforming Spaces

Arts partnerships can excel at reimagining and revitalising underutilised or overlooked spaces. Through creative interventions, vacant retail units, public underpasses, building exteriors, and commercial spaces can be transformed into vibrant cultural assets.

These transformations not only enhance the look and usage of buildings but can also address direct challenges such as anti-social behaviour while creating distinctive landmarks that attract visitors and improve public perception of areas. Many partnerships specifically target space activation to achieve both artistic and commercial objectives (e.g. providing a space for an arts organisation, whilst minimising vacancy). Some examples include:

- “Transformation of an empty retail unit into a theatrical space. The event effectively utilised a vacant shop front, transforming it into a positive civic area.”
- Transformation of the York Street Underpass with street art (Translink and Seedhead Arts)
- Integration of world class visual art within Belfast Harbour’s public space, helping to discourage vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

Quantifiable
Revenue Growth

For many partners, investment in arts projects can deliver direct and indirect financial returns that can be measured through increased sales and commercial performance. These often occur where there is a direct relationship between industries (e.g. events and transport, hospitality and suppliers etc). Further, partnerships can support the ongoing growth of events and festivals (e.g. increases in ticket sales), which in turn can support growth in the local economy.

Some of the quantified reported increases include:

- Translink & Culture Night: “Translink saw a 25% uplift on all evening and late-night services.”
- Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival and American Bar: “32% upturn in trade at the American Bar during CQAF”
- Stendhal and Alchemy: “Box office receipts increased by over 20%.”
- Open House and United Wines Beamish Sessions: “Beamish became the highest selling drink at the Court House.”
- The Junction and Cahoots: “Achieved a +21% increase in sales for retailers at The Junction over the three-day period.”

Outcomes Achieved

Examples

Staff Engagement
& Development

Arts partnerships can provide unique opportunities for workforce development and employee engagement. By involving staff in cultural activities, businesses foster creativity, improve morale, and strengthen team connections. Partnership evaluations consistently show high participation rates among employees, with significant percentages reporting positive impacts on their work experience.

Some notable quantified benefits mentioned in projects include:

- *“Supported our objectives to embed culture into its organisation and use links with creative organisations to support volunteering.”*
- *“Over 100 (of 130) staff availed of day tickets to the sponsored events.”*
- *“98% of staff recognised the role of the arts in engaging children and young people.”*
- *“Improved staff morale and engagement (over 30 staff members attended events, with 90% reporting a positive impact).”*

Community
Connection
& Local Impact

Arts partnerships create meaningful connections between businesses, arts organisations, and the wider community. Through targeted initiatives, partnerships can reach underserved groups, support local charities, and strengthen civic pride. Evaluation data shows consistently high satisfaction rates among community participants, with quantifiable increases in access to arts activities for diverse audiences. These partnerships generate measurable social impact while enhancing the reputation and impact of both partners.

- *“Achieved a community group satisfaction rate of 96.4%, with 72% giving 5 stars out of 5.”*
- *“Increased the number of local groups offered tickets by 42%.”*
- *“Developed new bursaries for under-supported art forms (theatre, comedy and visual arts).”*
- *“We raised an additional £7.9k for charity (Women’s Aid & NI Children’s Hospice, and St John Ambulance).”*
- *“90% of respondents to audience questionnaire stated that the festival significantly increased their feeling of belonging to the city.”*
- *“900 children were inspired to read and share books with their families during lockdown.”*

MEASURING THE IMPACTS
OF PARTNERSHIPS:

The research team has also reviewed all project evaluation forms and wider monitoring data to explore the wider economic and social impact of arts and business partnerships.

We find several key areas of wider impact generated by these partnerships and quantify these where possible.

1. Building audiences and growing participation in the arts: The partnerships have directly contributed to broadening and diversifying arts audiences across Northern Ireland. **Evaluation data shows that Investment Programme has supported projects with more than 424,000 attendees between 2019 and 2024.**

Many partnerships specifically aimed to reach new audiences, with several projects reporting success in engaging first-time attendees and underrepresented communities. For example, the Belfast International Arts Festival (BIAF) reported that 39% of visitors came from outside Belfast, with 6% being international visitors. Similarly, the Community Ticket Scheme supported by Belfast Harbour found that 56% of participants had little to no previous experience attending arts events.

The programme has helped arts organisations develop innovative approaches to audience engagement, including digital initiatives that expanded reach beyond traditional venue-based experiences. For example, the City of Derry International Choir Festival performance of Dreams has achieved over 280,000 online views.

Partnerships have been particularly effective at breaking down perceived barriers to arts participation, with community-focused projects reporting high satisfaction rates and return attendance.

Review of the top ten festivals and events backed by sponsorship which were match-funded through the Investment Programme support also highlights how these festivals have a combined most recent annual income in excess of £4m annually, with hundreds of thousands of attendees.

Building audiences and festival income is a key component for ensuring economic growth and sustainability within the creative industries.

2. Creating fair opportunities for artists: Review of Investment Programme partnerships suggest these have generated approximately 3,150 paid opportunities for artists in Northern Ireland, providing critical income streams for a sector often challenged by precarious and challenging employment conditions. This provides meaningful and fair opportunities for artists to perform and develop.

These opportunities span disciplines and have supported both established and emerging creative talent. For instance, CQAF’s development of bursaries for under-supported art forms (theatre, comedy and visual arts) demonstrates how partnerships can target specific gaps in artistic support. Similarly, Stendhal Festival partnered with businesses to deliver the largest and broadest family programme in their history, creating performance opportunities for diverse artists.

Many projects prioritised fair pay for artists, especially critical during the pandemic period. The Hit the North Street Art Festival, for example, was able to access higher-level artists through business partnership support, improving the quality and reputation of the event. The growth of events and paid commissions ensures opportunities for artists; and some businesses have also sponsored bursaries and equipment support to musicians, actors, and creatives as well.

3. Growing the local economy: The economic impact of these partnerships can be vital. Several arts organisations have cited the need for ongoing financial support within a tighter economic climate, and businesses also welcome matched funding and support to make their investment go further.

The arts and culture industry contributes £10.8bn a year to the UK economy¹⁴, and the Investment Programme highlights the highly connected supply chains that facilitate this economic contribution – between the arts sector, event spaces, bars, restaurants, hotels and transport providers. Recent estimates have also suggested that music tourism has generated £136m¹⁵ for the local economy in 2022.

There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between growing the local arts sector, and wider growth in areas such as tourism, hospitality, and food and drink – and this is reflected in some of the investment data.

We find that the Investment Programme's initial investment of £418,450 has helped unlock an additional £1.7m in private sector funding, representing a significant leverage effect. This, in turn, means that local businesses, particularly in retail, hospitality, and transport, have benefited from increased footfall and spending during arts events, as evidenced by the project evaluations.

Examples of this economic impact include: The Junction Retail & Leisure Park, where visitor numbers increased by 19% during the pantomime period compared to the same dates in 2020, whilst sales rose by 18% over the same comparison period; Translink reporting a 25% uplift on all evening and late-night services during Culture Night; and the American Bar seeing a 32% upturn in trade during the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival. The Junction saw an impressive 21% increase in sales for retailers over a three-day period of programming, while at the Court House in Bangor, Beamish became the highest

selling drink following United Wines' partnership with Open House.

The partnership model encourages local procurement and collaboration, retaining economic benefits within Northern Ireland. Festival and event partnerships have been particularly effective at generating economic activity, with multiple businesses reporting double-digit percentage increases in revenue during partnership activities.

4. Tackling Deprivation and Dereliction: Arts and business partnerships have proven effective in addressing physical dereliction and supporting regeneration in underutilised areas. Creative interventions have transformed vacant retail units, public underpasses, building exteriors, and spaces into cultural assets; particularly within public realm and retail centres. These transformations can also help to address practical challenges like anti-social behaviour, and support commercial properties manage costs with building maintenance such as rates payment relief through charity occupancy.

Within some areas, these partnerships can also bring the arts closer to the community (e.g. using easy-to-visit spaces); however, sustained investment may be required to provide greater longevity and security for many of these projects.

5. Workforce Development: The Investment Programme has delivered significant workforce development outcomes across both arts and business sectors. **We find that almost 1,200 business employees have directly benefitted from taking part in partnership activities.**

Evaluations consistently show high satisfaction rates among participating employees, with businesses reporting positive impacts on staff morale, engagement, innovation and creativity. Arts organisations can also gain valuable commercial insights and operational experience through their business partnerships, which can spillover into advice and board support.



These forms of collaboration may be difficult to access through traditional training approaches; but give staff a more creative outlet for developing capabilities, supporting the arts, and their own career development.

6. Inspiring the next generation: Partnerships have demonstrated particular success in engaging young people and supporting educational outcomes. Many Investment Programme projects include specific components targeting schools and youth groups, using arts-based approaches to address important issues and develop transferable skills.

CASE STUDY: **INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION**

Notable examples include the "Silly Moos" theatre project created by the Grand Opera House in partnership with Dale Farm, where 94% of children reported a greater understanding of where their food comes from, and 93% felt they had gained

knowledge of how their food journey impacts the planet. Similarly, Cinemagic's Talent Labs partnership with Belfast Harbour provided opportunities for over 350 young people to participate in creative industries masterclasses.

Educational initiatives range from creative workshops to performance opportunities, all designed to inspire confidence, creativity, and cultural awareness among young participants. These projects often focus on making arts accessible to young people who might otherwise have limited exposure to cultural experiences, helping to nurture future audiences and potential creative growth.

The BookTrust collaboration with Belfast Harbour provides another powerful example, with 900 children being inspired to read and share books with their families during lockdown through the distribution of "BIG Belfast Harbour Book Boxes" to Sure Start projects in disadvantaged areas of Belfast.

¹⁴ Cebr (2019), 'Economic impact of arts and culture on the national economy', Arts Council England

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-66237094>

7. Social Value and Corporate Social Responsibility:

Several businesses highlighted how arts partnerships provided a clear way to demonstrate their commitment to social value and wider corporate social responsibility. Working with arts organisations can offer a direct route for creating social value in communities, and this is reflected within the Investment Programme by several sectors developing clear evidence of social value.

The ability to measure and articulate this impact was valued by businesses seeking to demonstrate their contribution beyond financial performance. Arts organisations similarly recognised the importance of capturing and communicating these impacts, with one arts venue engaging with a Social Return on Investment exercise to develop “*specific metrics to show partners the reach and engagement with underserved communities, which resonates strongly with funders*”.

These impact areas set out above demonstrate how the Investment Programme generates benefits that span beyond the partners directly. The evidence highlights that relatively modest initial investments can help to generate and sustain significant impacts. Whilst the 4:1 return on investment is just one measure of success; it is equally important to consider the wider outcomes of growing the whole economy and supporting audience development, artistic opportunity, community regeneration, workforce skills, and youth engagement. These also align closely to the NI Executive’s Programme for Government (2024-27) priorities; most notably to grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy, support safer communities, as well as better supporting youth education, providing access to social and affordable initiatives, and showing how cross-sectoral partnerships may be used to help transform and maximise value within public services.

Stakeholder Insight: Taking a Strategic Approach

There is no single approach to partnership.

For some organisations, commercial sponsorship through branding may be the most attractive form of partnership; for others, there may be a greater need for support with community engagement and events.

Several stakeholders also spoke highly of the support provided by Arts & Business NI in enabling strategic and relevant fits for both arts and business organisations, helping to ensure aligned and collaborative approaches.

Image: Syncro swimmers at Joe Jacksons



UNLOCKING INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

This section explores private investment in the arts through partnerships and brokerage. Across the 157 businesses that have been members or participated in the Investment Programme, Arts & Business NI has tracked levels of private investment reported, directly and in-kind (covering 2019/20 to 2023/24).

Through this data, we find that:

- 91 businesses (59%) with Arts & Business NI membership or attendance have provided direct cash or in-kind support to an arts organisation within the last five years.
- Collectively, these businesses have contributed approximately £2.4m (including c. £1.7m in cash and c. £0.7m in-kind) to arts organisations across Northern Ireland over the five-year period.
- This signals the importance of these organisations in generating commercial sponsorship and funding to arts organisations and will reflect several of the organisations captured in the Arts Council NI’s Annual Funding Survey – demonstrating the importance of A&BNI as a catalyst for private investment.
- We note that often businesses will work with A&BNI to invest in projects and arts organisations outside of the Investment Programme – either where they can no longer avail of the Programme (beyond a certain period) but wish to keep investing, or due to other factors.
- The data suggests that approximately forty businesses across Northern Ireland continue to invest in the arts outside of the programme and have provided an additional c. £760k over the last five years.

- Initial review of participants within the Investment Programme also suggests that at least 61% of businesses have continued to invest or partner with arts organisations within novel projects following participation in the programme.

LEVELS OF INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

Through the monitoring data provided, we can also review which type of businesses have provided financial and in-kind support for arts organisations over the last five years. We explore the 91 businesses that have provided over £2.4m to arts organisations in this period below.

We find that arts partnerships attract business sponsorship from all business sizes, and that the total amount of investment is also relatively split between large firms (39%) and SMEs (61%). This also highlights that engagement with firms across all sizes is key to maximising partnership working.

FIGURE 7: COUNT AND INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS BY BUSINESS SIZE

Large 26 29%	Medium 24 26%	Small 22 24%	Micro 19 21%
Large £946,321 39%	Medium £530,949 22%	Small £640,364 25%	Micro £327,103 14%

Source: Review of A&BNI monitoring data (2019 – 24)

The research team has also explored investment levels by size and estimated headcount within Northern Ireland. These figures are experimental given the nature of company accounting at a regional level; however, this confirms the importance of engagement across all sizes and scale of businesses.

Larger firms typically contribute a higher absolute volume of investment within projects; however, this can be more limited when considered at a 'per FTE' basis, and many larger firms may also have competing challenges for social investment, charitable investments, and engagement with arts.

In comparison, SMEs can often have greater flexibility to provide investment into arts organisations, with more direct capacity to provide support. This can often result in higher support provided on a per FTE basis compared to other firms (e.g. a team of 4 staff providing a £5,000 donation vs a larger entity sponsoring £10,000 across a team of 4,000).

Review of total investment by sector within the A&BNI member organisation sample also highlights the highest level of investment has been provided by Retail & Shopping firms (22%, £532,944 including in-kind contributions). This reflects the potential for spaces such as vacant shopping centre units to be activated by arts organisations across Northern Ireland. The Retail & Shopping sector is followed by Transport & Infrastructure at 16% (£395,455), driven primarily by key partners such as Translink and

Belfast Harbour. The data also shows the importance of firms in sectors such as Banking, Finance & Insurance which contribute 13% (£323,790). These three sectors alone represent 51% of total private sector investment (£1,252,189).

The data also highlights potential room to expand sponsorship activity within high-growth sectors such as professional services (8%) and technology and IT (6%).

Large Firms (n=26)
£10.68 per Full Time Equivalent (FTE) per annum (average)

- ✓ Strong levels of investment compared to other arts investment opportunities.
- ✗ High variance in investment per FTE per annum across firms.

Medium-Sized Firms (n=24)
£48.62 per FTE per annum (average)

- ✓ Stronger link between partnership focus and commercial objectives and larger scale local partnerships.
- ✓ CSR can be a driver and becomes increasingly important as businesses grow.
- ✓ Greater flexibility and pace of decision-making, and 5x greater level of support per FTE than larger businesses.
- ✗ Scale and variety of social value and CSR opportunities must be available to meet growth objectives.

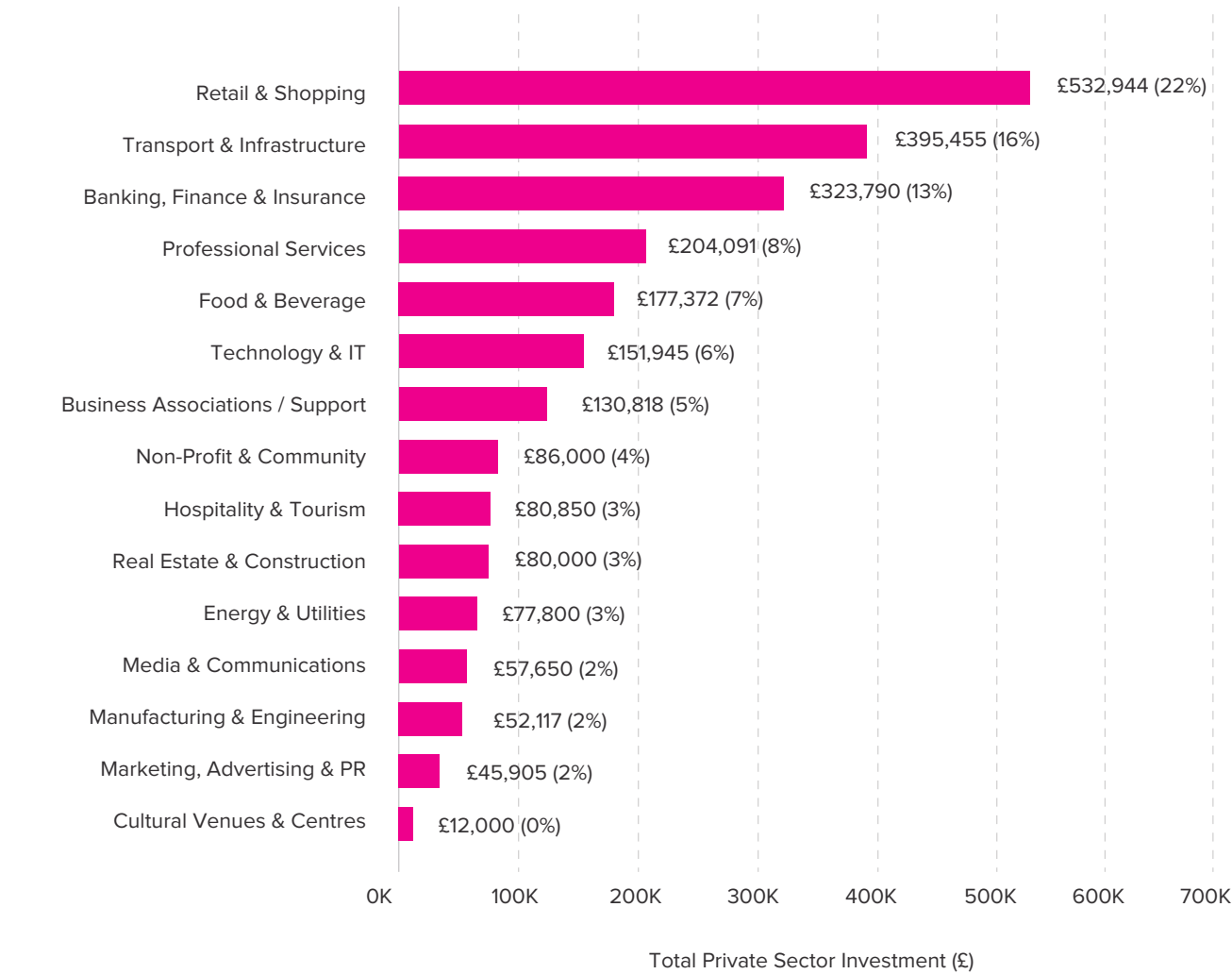
Small Firms (n=22)
£107.59 per FTE per annum

- ✓ Significant investments and partnerships relative to business size.
- ✗ Less certainty of support given greater vulnerability to short-term business performance and macroeconomic conditions.

Micro Firms (19):
c. £1,196 per FTE per annum

- ✓ Includes social enterprises and organisations closely aligned to arts.
- ✗ Effectively targeting supportive micro entities could be resource intensive and therefore poses greater resource risk.

FIGURE 8: TOTAL INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS BY BUSINESS SECTOR (INCLUDING ALL PRIVATE INVESTMENT TRACKED BY BUSINESSES)

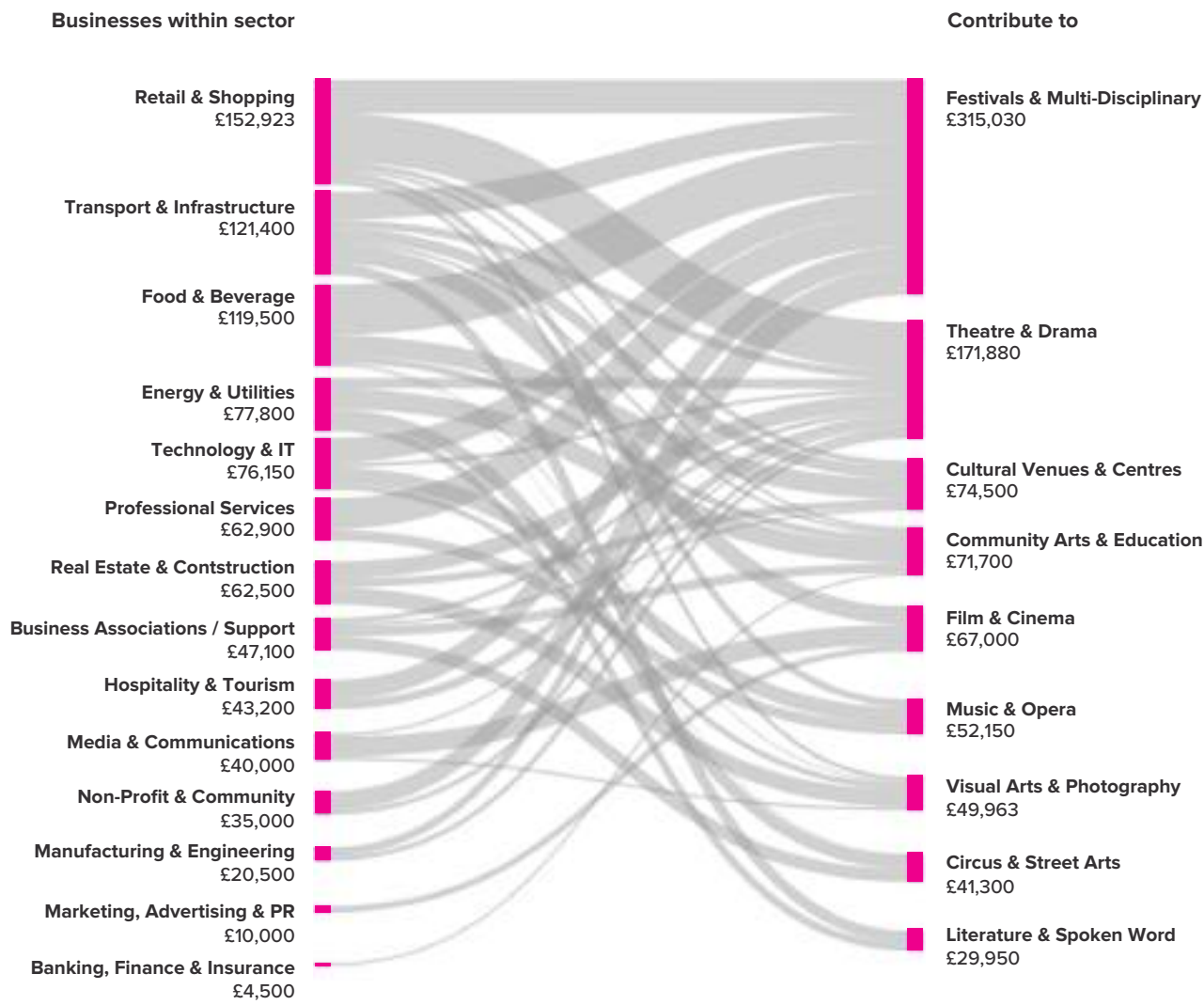


Source: Review of A&BNI monitoring data (2019-24 – entire member organisation sample). This figure tracks all private investment made by NI businesses as reported to A&BNI each year within monitoring data. This includes investment provided as private match within the Investment Programme, in addition to any private contributions made by the business (financial and in-kind) outside of the programme.

HOW IS INVESTMENT UTILISED BY PARTNERS?

Review of **funding provided for Investment Programme projects** provides more granular insight into the typical investment flow between business sectors and types of arts organisation. The Sankey diagram below provides insight into how businesses involved in investment programme projects direct their investments across the arts disciplines, revealing patterns of engagement and potential strategic opportunities.

FIGURE 9: INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS (FLOW) WITHIN THE A&BNI INVESTMENT PROGRAMME



Source: Review of A&BNI monitoring data (2019-24 – investment programme projects only)

This Investment Programme monitoring data highlights:

- The significant role of place (retail and shopping) and the benefits of investing in links to footfall, events, and space (e.g. shopping centres and arts space). Retail & Shopping (£152,923) demonstrates the strongest investment connection with Festivals & Multi-Disciplinary events (£315,030), likely leveraging the footfall-generating potential of these activities. This relationship underscores the commercial value retailers place on vibrant cultural programming that attracts diverse audiences.
- There may be opportunities to grow NI's local and artisanal food and beverage sector with local festivals through partnership engagement. Food & Beverage businesses (£119,500) direct substantial investment toward Festivals & Multi-Disciplinary events, reflecting natural synergies between culinary experiences and cultural programming.
- There is opportunity for ongoing social value and engagement with community arts groups. Energy & Utilities (£77,800) demonstrate particular interest in Community Arts & Education (£71,700), aligning with corporate social responsibility objectives and local stakeholder engagement.
- Professional Services firms primarily engage with festival and event-based funding, reflecting the need for branding and staff engagement.
- The data highlights increasing importance of visual arts, design and space planning for real estate and developers, which may add economic value to the development of new commercial and residential spaces. The data also highlights opportunities to further increase investment from sectors such as advanced manufacturing.



MAKING THE CASE FOR ARTS AND BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS

BUSINESSES ENGAGEMENT: STRATEGIC VALUE, NOT JUST PHILANTHROPY

The evidence shows that business partnerships with arts organisations represent strategic investments that deliver measurable returns. We find evidence of:

Commercial Drivers

- **Brand visibility and recognition:** 76% of partnerships cite this as a primary objective, with documented outcomes such as "95% of festival attendees recognised [company] as a key sponsor" and advertising value equivalents reaching six-figures for some businesses within festival events.
- **Measurable footfall increases:** For retailers and public-facing businesses, we find evidence of direct financial benefits from sponsorship, such as upticks in retail footfall, transport usage, and sales increases of over 30% for some retail businesses during partnership events.
- **New audience access:** The activities and events supported by the Investment Programme reached over 424,000 attendees between 2019-2024, providing businesses access to a wide range of demographic groups, and provided over 3,000 working opportunities for local artists.
- **Growing the NI arts sector:** The NI arts sector is a key contributor to economic growth. We find that supported events via the Investment Programme provided over 3,000 working opportunities for local artists, and there is evidence of shows and events also being able to grow and tour supported events internationally, growing Northern Ireland's export base. The mutual recognition of supporting growth across both arts organisation and business partner is a critical component of Arts& Business NI support.

Organisational Development

- **Employee engagement:** Nearly 1,200 business employees directly benefitted from partnership activities, with reported improvements in staff morale, retention, and professional development.
- **Skills development:** Arts partnerships nurture creativity and collaboration skills increasingly valued in knowledge economy workplaces.

Spatial Value

- **Place activation:** Partnerships have clearly and visibly transformed dozens of vacant retail units, public underpasses, and commercial properties across Northern Ireland into vibrant cultural assets. This is a key part of transforming and enriching public services and tackling deprivation and anti-social behaviour.
- **Regeneration catalysts:** Creative interventions address physical dereliction, and activating spaces through arts partnerships can help commercial organisations manage costs and increase indirect spending and revenue for their tenants.

Increasing Private Levels of Investment

Northern Ireland has a well-known high prevalence of SME businesses. The data suggests a significant investment gap compared to other regions. We estimate that in 2023/24, private investment in the arts equates to only £0.65 per capita in Northern Ireland, which compares unfavourably to £1.39 in Ireland and up to £3.34 in England.

Closing this gap represents a substantial growth opportunity for both sectors. Increasing SME engagement with the arts may be one mechanism to support this increase; as noted by investment levels per FTE within size bands. As found within the current firms investment, private investment varies significantly by business size, with per-employee contributions highest among smaller organisations (from £10.68 per employee annually for large firms, growing to £48.62 per employee for medium firms annually (5× greater than large businesses), and £107.59 per employee for small firms, and £1,196 per employee for micro firms. This may be skewed due to sample size but reflects the potential for growth.

However, we note that collectively trusts and foundations, and private sponsorship and donations currently represent c.8% of arts organisations income in Northern Ireland; as such, increasing this figure may be welcome, but is not likely to be a silver bullet, and sustained access to a wide range of funding and supporting income streams is a key area of focus for longer term sustainability.

The Economic Imperative

Arts & Business NI’s Investment Programme demonstrates strong effectiveness as a funding mechanism, with **every £1 of public investment unlocking £4 of private sector funding**.

This effect represents high value for money and demonstrates how public finances can be maximised to encourage additional private investment.

The programme’s success extends beyond initial investment, with **61% of businesses continuing to invest** in arts partnerships after programme participation ends, creating sustainable relationships that can endure without ongoing public support.

Growing the Creative Industries

Supporting arts and business partnerships directly contributes to Northern Ireland’s creative economy and reflects commercial partnership as much as wider social value.

This research emphasises how the NI Creative Industries sector contributes £1.6bn to GVA annually, with the Cultural Sector contributing c. £328m, with 24% growth from previous year. Wider research for ACNI also highlights how these partnerships can support an arts community of over 700 arts organisations and 14,500 artists in Northern Ireland.

Creativity in the Age of AI

As artificial intelligence (AI) and automation starts to transform employment, arts partnerships may become more important in shaping workforce needs, driven by:

- Creativity consistently ranking as a critical future-proof skill for industry.
- Arts partnerships develop human-driven partnerships that cannot be replicated with technology alone.
- Arts engagement helps to support innovation, collaboration, and adaptive thinking.

In Conclusion: Why Should Organisations Invest Time and Resources in Creative Partnerships?

Investing time and resources in creative partnerships simply put, makes good business sense. The case for arts and business collaboration extends beyond philanthropy – it is about **mutual benefit and strategic value**.

Businesses gain competitive advantages and fulfil objectives in ways that conventional approaches often cannot match, while arts organisations gain support and avenues to grow. In Northern Ireland’s context, these partnerships also align with broader economic and social strategies, amplifying their importance.

- **To innovate and inspire:** The arts inject creativity into business operations, helping companies innovate. Fresh perspectives from artists can lead to product ideas, creative marketing campaigns, or new approaches to customer experience.
- **To engage employees:** Creative collaborations energise the workforce. Participating in an arts project can build staff teamwork, morale, and skills in a way traditional training often doesn’t. *“Creativity can light up staff in a way that corporate training may never achieve”*

- **To reach new markets and audiences:** Partnering with cultural events or organisations can open doors to new customer segments. Arts tie-ins often attract media attention and public interest, extending a company’s reach.
- **To enhance brand and reputation:** A company seen to support the arts is viewed as community-minded, creative, and forward-thinking. This boosts brand equity and public goodwill. Many firms also enjoy the exclusive branding opportunities (e.g. title sponsorship of a festival) that come with arts partnerships.
- **To meet CSR and community goals:** Arts partnerships are an effective way to deliver on corporate social responsibility commitments. They provide authentic projects that improve communities, education, wellbeing or the environment, aligning with company values.
- **To attract investment and talent:** On a macro level, a vibrant arts culture – which business support helps sustain – makes Northern Ireland more attractive for inward investment and for talented individuals (employees or entrepreneurs) to live and work here.

Several business leaders recognise that supporting the creative sector is an investment in the long-term attractiveness and economic growth of the region that benefits all businesses.

Schemes such as the A&BNI Investment Programme, which is funded by Arts Council Northern Ireland and supports creative partnerships across NI, represent high value for money, generating returns far beyond its cost through multiplier effects, supporting festivals and events, workforce development, community regeneration, and increasing commercial potential. However, this also highlights the need for sustained investment for current and new partnerships to form — creating not just project value, but economic and social impact across Northern Ireland.

APPENDICES



CASE STUDIES

George Best Belfast City Airport & Cinemagic: Creating Opportunities for Young People

Belfast City Airport partnered with Cinemagic (a youth film charity) to run the IGNITE youth leadership programme. Over the last five years, through this arts mentoring initiative, over 100 young people have developed film-making and leadership skills, gaining confidence and exposure to creative industries.

In 2024, students undertook a once-in-a-lifetime trip to LA to engage and learn from major players within the media industry. Throughout the week, teenagers from 12 schools and colleges in Northern Ireland and Los Angeles engaged in exclusive talks, along with tours and masterclasses at top film and TV studios.

For the airport, the project reinforces its community engagement and brand values.

“IGNITE forms an integral part of Belfast City Airport’s community engagement efforts. When IGNITE was first launched, our goal was to offer life changing opportunities to 100 young people throughout a five-year period, and it is fantastic that we have been able to surpass this initial aim to successfully support 120 young people from 2019 to 2024, equipping them with essential skills, knowledge, and experiences to emerge as future leaders in their communities.”

Michelle Hatfield, Chief People & Marketing Officer at Belfast City Airport

“The strength of Cinemagic’s partnership with Belfast City Airport has been instrumental in the success of the IGNITE programme, allowing us to create numerous opportunities for local young people. Over the past year, each of our IGNITE participants have embraced new challenges, stepping outside their comfort zones and gaining new experiences with confidence.”

Joan Burney Keatings MBE, Chief Executive of Cinemagic

Translink and Seedhead Arts – Transforming Spaces

Translink (NI’s public transport provider) collaborated with Seedhead Arts (a creative social enterprise) to transform the formerly derelict urban underpass at York Street in North Belfast. Fifteen local street artists were commissioned to create vibrant murals.

In August 2024, Translink announced a transformative Street Art Jam, the first collaboration between Translink, Seedhead Arts, and A&BNI, to revitalise the space.

The artistic vision for the underpass included murals by street artists from across Northern Ireland, divided into ‘City’ and ‘Country’ themes, celebrating the diverse landscapes and communities connected by public transport. North Belfast Poet Niamh McNally also wrote a poem entitled ‘Line Work’ that captures the voices and journeys of local people.

“This project is about creating a journey and connection for everyone who passes through, offering moments of reflection and inspiration.”

Niamh McNally

The project not only transformed a neglected space into an attractive gateway near a new station, but also actively involved the local community. This partnership improved the customer experience (commuters now enjoy a colourful, welcoming environment) and garnered positive media coverage, all aligning with Translink’s corporate responsibility goals. It stands as a model of how business resources and artistic talent can together reimagine public space and instil community pride.

“This project is about more than just beautifying the space—it’s about creating connections. By involving street artists from across the country who deeply understand and respect graffiti culture, and by consulting with the local community, we’re crafting a mural that transforms the underpass into a safe and welcoming wayfare. The street art will enhance the space and foster a sense of pride and connectedness, ensuring it remains a lasting, positive fixture in the community while naturally deterring vandalism.”

Adam Turkington, Seedhead Arts

"This transformation, shaped by extensive community engagement, revitalised the underpass enhancing safety, reducing anti-social behaviour, and augmenting both its aesthetic appeal and wayfinding through vibrant street art. We've listened to residents and local leaders and have collaborated closely with the Department for Infrastructure, who own the underpass, and who are dedicated to creating a safe, welcoming space that reflects the vibrant and diverse spirit of North Belfast."

Michael Holmes, Translink Programme Manager

Image: Translink and Seedhead Arts Transform the York Street Station Underpass



KPMG & Royal Ulster Academy (RUA): Brand Alignment - Investing for the Long-Term

KPMG has a long-running partnership with the Royal Ulster Academy of Arts, one of NI’s most prestigious visual arts institutions. Now in its 17th year, this partnership has included sponsoring the RUA’s annual exhibition and co-developing community art projects.

KPMG employees have volunteered and participated in arts outreach programmes through the RUA, bringing creative experiences to local schools and communities. In return, KPMG gains brand association with the arts and culture, and opportunities for client engagement at cultural events.

“This partnership brings an extra dimension to our business by lending a creative influence which helps enrich our day-to-day work and enthuses our teams. We were delighted last year to extend our successful connection with the RUA and hope that our positive experience encourages others to look at how they might help support other organisations in the sector”

Johnny Hanna, Partner, KPMG Northern Ireland

As part of its sponsorship, KPMG also has an annual Young Artist Award. This year’s winner (2025) was Saoirse Condon, chosen by KPMG staff. Saoirse is a recent graduate of the Belfast School of Art Ulster University.

c21 Theatre Company & Castle Mall Community Arts Partnership – Fostering Community Cohesion

c21 Theatre Company's innovative partnership with Choice Housing and Castle Mall Shopping Centre demonstrates how strategic arts investment can foster community cohesion, while also strengthening business relationships. This year-long collaboration addressed the critical need to bridge divides between national and international communities in Antrim, using arts as a catalyst for mutual understanding and inclusion.

The project delivered comprehensive arts programming across multiple venues and demographics. For example, during the Antrim Mini Mela, workshops engaged school children from diverse cultural backgrounds in performance, storytelling, music, and dance within Castle Mall Shopping Centre. The innovative "Living Windows" initiative captured community participation through green screen sessions at local schools including Parkhall Primary and Six Mile Primary, transforming this content into seasonal video installations displayed in Antrim town centre business windows during Halloween and Christmas 2024.

The programme achieved significant reach, directly impacting over 1,000 participants while employing 14 artists across Mid and East Antrim Borough Council areas. Beyond immediate engagement, the initiative successfully embedded arts strategies into their community engagement approaches, making their businesses more appealing to surrounding communities.

"c21 Theatre Company has delivered some very creative and exciting initiatives across Northern Ireland, placing local people at the heart of these projects and we are delighted that so many people have been involved."

Mark Kent, Good Relations Officer at Choice Housing

The collaboration's success extends beyond project completion, establishing a five-year verbal partnership commitment between c21 and Choice Housing.

"It was a real pleasure to work in collaboration with Choice Housing, Arts & Business NI and Castle Mall Shopping Centre to bring our latest installation to Antrim for the Christmas period."

Stephen Kelly, Creative Director of c21 Theatre Company

Further, Castle Mall Centre Manager Pamela Minford now serves as a c21 board member, demonstrating the depth of institutional commitment generated by the partnership.

Image: Living Windows by C21, Choice Housing and Castle Mall, supported by A&BNI Investment Programme

Belfast Harbour – Community Arts Grants Programme - Investing in Social Value

Belfast Harbour Commissioners (which manages Belfast’s port and real estate) has a Community Awards scheme that provides grants to grassroots causes. In the past five years, this has included direct funding for arts and cultural organisations as part of its corporate social responsibility.

Through its Community Awards fund, Belfast Harbour offers grants up to £5,000 for community groups. In 2022 alone, the Harbour gave £87,000 across 25 charities and community groups.

Beneficiaries in that year ranged from photography and literature charities to community arts projects – for example, Belfast Exposed (a photography gallery), An Droichead (an Irish language arts and culture centre), Fighting Words NI (creative writing education), and New Lodge Arts (a youth arts project) all received funding.

These microgrants provided critical support for local arts programmes and festivals, often at the community or grassroots level. Funding from Belfast Harbour allowed such groups to run workshops, exhibitions, and events that might otherwise lack resources.

For instance, grants supported cross-community arts activities, cultural heritage programming, and youth creative skills development. By seeding multiple small projects, the support enriched Northern Ireland’s cultural landscape at the grass-roots level, extending arts access to diverse communities.

Belfast Harbour frames these donations as part of its “*wider responsible business activity*” and commitment to local communities, and these are core to its Social Value.

Alchemy Technology Services and The Playhouse Theatre – Building Workforce Confidence and Skills

Alchemy Technology Services based in Derry/Londonderry is a community-orientated company, they seek to create opportunities in arts, sports, and business that nurture talent and benefit future generations. A key part of this mission involves partnering with local organisations like The Playhouse Theatre, which shares Alchemy’s values of collaboration, community and investment in people.

The Challenge: As Alchemy grew, the company identified a need to strengthen employees’ communication skills for situations such as client meetings, demos, and stand-ups. Confidence in presenting to stakeholders, whether virtually or in person, was seen as essential for professional growth and successful client relationships.

The Partnership: To address this, Alchemy partnered with The Playhouse to design ‘The Art of Communication’, a bespoke course aimed at developing presence, communication, and listening skills. The programme not only aligned with Alchemy’s values of collaboration and investment in people but also complemented The Playhouse’s mission to foster creativity and innovation in the community.

Training took place at The Playhouse Theatre, and the creative setting helped participants break away from routine, connect with colleagues across teams, and draw inspiration from expert facilitators. Through four creative modules, participants learned to communicate effectively with small and large groups, use body awareness to remain present and focused, develop daily practices for managing energy and mindset, and enhance active listening skills.

The Impact: The partnership delivered benefits well beyond skill-building. Employees reported feeling more confident in client interactions, better equipped to listen and collaborate, and more comfortable stepping outside their comfort zones. Communication skills learned from the course have helped individuals express themselves clearly, listen actively, and engage in effective conversations with colleagues and stakeholders. The initiative also reinforced Alchemy’s workplace culture, one that offers recognition, growth, and support.

“At Alchemy we have leveraged the Arts and Music to help us deliver on a key aspect of our mission around helping our people to be the ‘best version of themselves’. Working with The Playhouse has allowed our people to explore and tap into their authentic selves. We promise our customers that we will be open and honest in our projects and will collaborate with them to deliver success. This course has contributed to our efforts to deliver on this promise. The feedback from our team on has been extreme positive. They not only found what they have learned to be useful in their work but equally useful in their daily lives.”

John Harkin, Founder and CEO, Alchemy Technology Services

Millennium Forum Theatre and Conference Centre and Aircoach – Supporting Organisational Values and Giving Back

The Millennium Forum Theatre and Conference Centre in Derry/Londonderry partnered with Aircoach, Ireland’s leading private bus and coach operator, on a community project that championed wellbeing and celebrated the power of the arts.

Rooted in both organisations’ values, the initiative set out to improve mental wellbeing through creative engagement, bringing together people of all ages and backgrounds. From lively hip-hop and dance sessions for young people at Bishop Street Community Centre, to street art projects which transformed the outdoor space at the Cathedral Youth Club, and drama and singing workshops for older participants at the Gasyard Centre - each activity promoted connection, expression, and improved confidence. The project culminated in a showcase where guests were transported by coach to each venue, experiencing first-hand the creativity, commitment, and achievements of everyone involved.

“At Aircoach, we’re passionate about connecting people, not just through travel, but through meaningful community initiatives. Supporting the Artscoach project has been a brilliant opportunity to give back in a way that aligns with our values. It’s great to see how the arts can bring people together, support mental wellbeing, and create lasting connections across generations. We’re proud to partner with the Millennium Forum and Arts & Business NI on such a positive and impactful project.”

Emily Dover, Marketing Executive, Aircoach

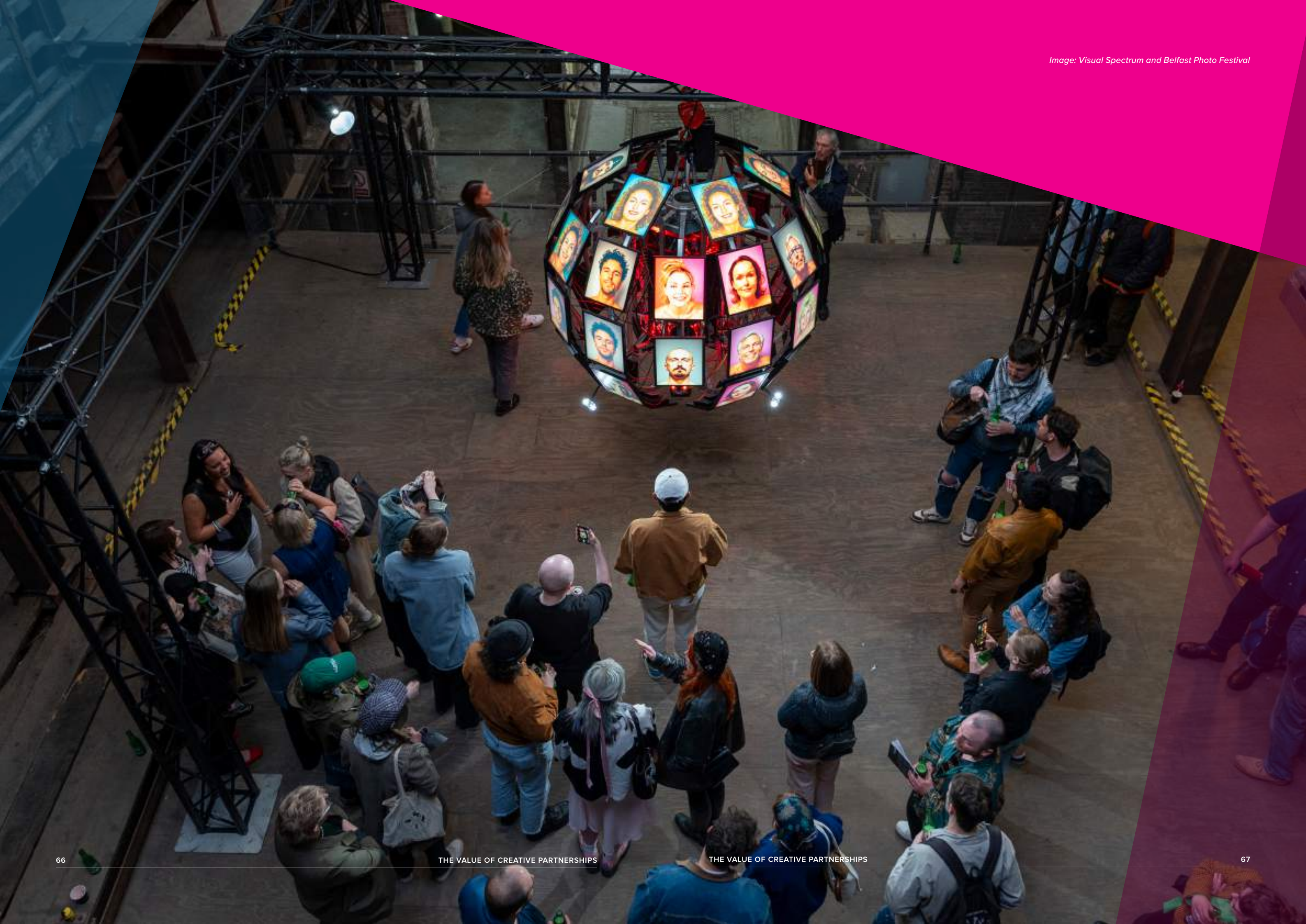
"Artscoach is all about using creativity as a tool to support people’s mental health. It’s been fantastic to see different generations coming together in shared spaces, learning new skills and connecting through the arts. We’re really grateful to Arts & Business NI and Aircoach for backing this project – their support is helping us reach further into the community and supports Aircoach’s own business objectives around meaningful local engagement. The Millennium Forum has a strong track record of working with business partners to create real impact and this project is another example of how sponsorship can help us make the arts – and our theatre – more accessible to everyone."

Cara McCartney, Development & Creative Engagement Manager, Millennium Forum



Millennium Forum's Artscoach 2025 project, funded by Arts & Business NI in partnership with Aircoach. Photographs by Martin McKeown







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