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Northern Culture Untapped Inquiry: Northern Culture Parliamentary Group

Evidence submitted by XR Stories
and XR Network+, University of York
in partnership with the York and North
Yorkshire Combined Authority

February 2026

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About Us

The University of York is a world-class research institution, with strong links to the Creative and Cultural Industries and has for more than 20 years conducted applied research at the convergence of engineering, science, arts, humanities, and social science. This work is University-wide with particular strengths in the School of Arts and Creative Technologies, the School of Physics, Engineering and Technology, and the Departments of Computer Science and Psychology.

Based at the University of York, XR Stories was founded as an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded Creative Industries Cluster Partnership (CICP) and between 2018-2024 it provided £3.5m of funding to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) working in virtual production (VP) and extended reality (XR) in Yorkshire and the Humber. It continues to provide researchers, companies, creatives and cultural organisations with access to expertise, infrastructure and facilities to unlock the potential of XR and next generation convergent media technologies. XR Stories also leads the 2022-2027 Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) XR Network+ VP in the Digital Economy project, which brings together five universities to undertake research into the future of VP and to fund co-created projects between academia and industry.

The work of XR Stories builds upon a series of major research projects relating to creative technologies at the University of York. Since 2014, the EPSRC Intelligent Games and Game Intelligence Centre for Doctoral Training has been developing the next generation of interdisciplinary researchers, designers, developers, and entrepreneurs for the games industry. From 2015-2022 the EPSRC/AHRC/Innovate UK (IUK) funded Digital Creativity Labs worked with Creative Industries partners to maximise impact from research in digital games, interactive media and AI. From 2020-2024 the Research England Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) introduced a portfolio of research, skills development, business support and diversity and inclusion interventions to complement XR Stories. Most recently, 2023 saw the launch of the University of York led CoSTAR Live Lab, one of five labs forming a connected infrastructure, funded by AHRC to support future R&D in the screen and live performance industries.

Introduction

The evidence presented is based on work¹ that XR Stories has conducted in partnership with the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, to gather new data and evidence on the Creative Industries in York and North Yorkshire. Conducted over the course of 2025, this work included the commissioning of an analysis of Creative Industries Size and Concentration report², a policy opportunities report³, bespoke Creative Industries data requests to ONS Local⁴, creative business/practitioner focus groups, and a Creative Economy Census produced in partnership with York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority⁵. While the main aim of this work was to improve understanding of the Creative Industries and the wider creative economy in York and North Yorkshire, it also generated a series of pertinent findings that evidence the interconnected nature and value that the creative and cultural heritage sectors hold for one another in the region. In short, the findings presented in this section serve to illustrate how the shared prosperities of the Cultural and Creative Industries in York and North Yorkshire are inextricably linked and pivotal to one another's success.

Data Source: *The York and North Yorkshire Creative Economy Census 2025*

The findings herein presented in this evidence are drawn from the results of the York and North Yorkshire Creative Economy Census 2025. The census collected responses from 205 individuals who work in the York and North Yorkshire creative economy, with detailed information provided on 277 primary and secondary roles held by respondents, and a further 4,319 people identified as being employed in the

¹ O'Connor et al., (2025) The Creative Industries in York and North Yorkshire: The evidence supporting our city, region and rural creative powerhouse. XR Stories, York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority. Available at: <https://xrstories.co.uk/publication/the-creative-industries-in-york-and-north-yorkshire-the-evidence-supporting-our-city-region-and-rural-creative-powerhouse/>

² Hatch Consulting., (2025) York and North Yorkshire Creative Industries Analysis of size and concentration. Available at: <https://xrstories.co.uk/publication/york-and-north-yorkshire-creative-industries-analysis-of-size-and-concentration/>

³ O'Connor et al., (2025) Our Creative Potential: Policy opportunities for York and North Yorkshire. XR Stories. Available at: <https://xrstories.co.uk/publication/our-creative-potential-policy-opportunities-for-york-and-north-yorkshire/>

⁴ ONS Local, (2025) Estimated number of creative industries jobs, for combined authorities and specified local authorities, 2020 to 2024. Office for National Statistics. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/adhocs/3036onslocalestimatnumberofcreativeindustriesjobsforcombinedauthoritiesandspecifiedlocalauthorities2020to2024>

⁵ Harrison et al., (2025) York and North Yorkshire Creative Economy Census Technical Report. XR Stories, York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority. Available at: <https://xrstories.co.uk/publication/york-and-north-yorkshire-creative-economy-census-technical-report/>

Creative Industries across the region⁶. The census included questions on the following topics:

- Profile of your primary/secondary business/organisation and role
- Barriers to business/organisation growth
- Business support usage, needs and improvements
- Innovation and sustainability
- Working with freelancers
- Support for the creative economy
- Creative spaces, networks and festivals
- Celebrating creativity in York and North Yorkshire

The census results revealed a regional creative economy that is geographically dispersed with 46% of respondents living in urban communities, 40% rural and 13% coastal. The sample is predominantly female (60%) with 60% of respondents aged 25–54. Most respondents (65%) work in a single creative economy role, while 35% hold multiple roles. The majority of respondents (73%) were employed in Creative occupations within the Creative Industries, while 14% worked in non-creative occupations within the Creative Industries and 13% worked in creative occupations outside of the Creative Industries.

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The findings from the census are considered to be of most relevance to questions from the first two main themes outlined in the North Culture Untapped inquiry's terms of reference document, and as such the evidence presented will focus on select questions from these themes only.

1. What is the true value of the North's Cultural Capital?

The importance and value that the North's cultural capital holds for the wider economy and society across the North is well understood in many respects. In November 2024, North Yorkshire Council published the North Yorkshire Cultural Strategy⁷, which outlined the strength and breadth of cultural assets and activity across the region and highlighted the importance that culture and a coherent cultural strategy holds for community, health, the environment, children and young people, and economic prosperity across the region.

However, beyond this, there has been less attention paid to the important reciprocal role that the region's creative economy plays in supporting and benefiting from York and North Yorkshire's world class cultural heritage

⁶ Other more comprehensive datasets¹ have estimated this figure at between 18,000 and 23,000 jobs.

⁷ North Yorkshire Council (2024) North Yorkshire Cultural Strategy. Available at:

<https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/North-Yorkshire-Cultural-Strategy.pdf>

assets. This is particularly pertinent in light of the renewed prioritisation of the Creative Industries at both a national and regional level, with the Creative Industries being named as one of eight sectors driving growth in the UK government's 2025 Modern Industrial Strategy⁸, and as one of five competitive advantage sectors named in the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority's 2025 Local Growth Plan⁹.

The intersection between the Creative Economy and Heritage Sector in York and North Yorkshire: Insights from the Creative Economy Census

Results from the York and North Yorkshire Creative Economy Census revealed a significant intersection between work in the Creative Economy and the heritage sector, with 41% of respondents (n = 273) reporting that their creative economy work overlapped with heritage sector activity in York and North Yorkshire. Further analysis revealed variation in the extent of crossover for different geographies, with 59% of Coastal, 41% of Rural, and 36% of Urban-based respondents reporting overlap, respectively.

When asked to provide further details on how their creative economy role(s) intersected with the heritage sector, 32% reported working for, or in partnership with, museums, theatres, and other cultural heritage organisations, with some delivering heritage-related work for local councils. This work spanned a wide variety of different subsectors within the Creative Industries, including marketing and web content, costume work and the production of immersive multimedia visitor experiences.

Many respondents (17%) reported using listed buildings and heritage sites as locations for their work. This included use of sites as performance spaces and places from which to run their business, with some respondents stating that they are directly involved in the upkeep of these buildings.

While a significant proportion of respondents (20%) also reported drawing on local heritage as material for their creative work, this included immersive VR, audio trails and the repurposing of historic buildings as studios. Coastal respondents referenced maritime heritage as an influence for creative work, citing the use of local landscapes and landmarks as the basis for paintings.

⁸ Department for Business and Trade, "The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy," 2025, [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy>

⁹ York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, "Local Growth Plan," 2025, [Online] Available at: <https://yorknorthyorks-ca.gov.uk/our-strategy/localgrowthplan/>

More widely, 20% of respondents also cited the region as being the subject or inspiration for their creative work, with urban based respondents most frequently mentioning heritage and the "...opportunity to tell the stories of the past creatively through the design of places." This was contrasted by respondents in rural and coastal communities, who tended to find inspiration in the natural landscape, nature and geology.

15% of respondents, across all geographies, referred to their work with heritage crafts, including stained glass making, glass blowing and letterpress, with some running crafts workshops, and others describing the skills associated with their craft work as being 'endangered'. Rural-based respondents often cited intersections involving their heritage craft work and community projects at national parks, connecting endangered crafts with the local landscape and its history. Rural and coastal respondents, in particular, also reported working at heritage events and festivals. While several participants also pointed to the tourism industry as an important enabling factor in their creative cultural heritage work. Lastly, some participants reported working in archiving and the preservation of cultural heritage artifacts.

Cultural and Heritage festivals as essential infrastructure in the Creative Economy

Creative Economy Census respondents reported working at Cultural festivals more than any other type of festival, with 42% of respondents (n = 74) reporting having worked at one in some capacity, and 19% reporting that they had worked at heritage festivals (the 5th most attended type of festival). The range of specific festivals cited included the Eboracum Roman Festival, Whitby Fish & Ships Festival, Jorvik Viking Festival, Robin Hood's Bay Victorian Weekend, Bridlington Old Town Vintage Festival, York Unlocked and Scarborough Sea Festival. Respondents described festivals as being "very important, "vital" and "essential" to their work, helping them to reach customers, build networks and collaborate with other creative practitioners. Beyond the direct economic benefits, respondents also cited the immense value that creative festivals hold in building communities and bringing people together.

Fulfilment from work in the Creative Economy

Census respondents also reported a range of non-economic benefits that they experience in relation to their creative economy work. These included:

expressing creativity (74%), the ability to make a positive impact (70%), working with other creatives (60%), varied roles and tasks/projects (56%).

a. What's needed to untap investment in the North's cultural infrastructure and the cultural economy?

Census respondents repeatedly called for the following three interventions above all else to unlock further growth in the region's creative economy:

Affordable creative space: Over a third (39%) of respondents reported that their business/organisation does not own space and 45% said that they had experienced difficulties finding workspace within York/North Yorkshire. Across all geographies, there was strong emphasis on the need for affordable studio, rehearsal, and exhibition spaces. Several respondents also pointed to high business rates as a barrier. However, demand for workspace was most acute in urban areas, with 58% of respondents' saying that workspace was too expensive in urban areas.

Better support for freelancers and microbusinesses: Freelancers are an essential component of the region's creative economy with 36% of roles being freelance and 17% sole-proprietor. 64% of respondents reported working with creative freelancers, who supply a wide range of creative skills and services, and 15% of businesses/organisations reported working with more than 25 creative freelancers. Yet freelance roles are often highly precarious and under supported, with respondents repeatedly citing challenges relating to their freelance employment, including a lack of tailored business support, difficulties in accessing training and upskilling, and an inability to improve the sustainability of their work.

Small and flexible funding: Closely related to the above point - respondents called for the provision of more small, targeted and easily accessible grants and funding initiatives to support the growth of micro businesses and sole traders, in addition to services to help navigate funding application processes, such as grant writing workshops.

b. What are the pinch points and growth sectors in the North's cultural economy - what are the barriers to growth in the cultural economy?

The top ten general barriers that respondents reported as being particularly relevant to their business or organisation were:

- Access to finance, including eligibility for grants (54%)
- Customers lack of disposable income (cost of living crisis) (49%)
- Increased competition (37%)
- York/North Yorkshire location (32%)
- Limited customer base (30%)
- Poor local transport (20%)
- Associated costs of employing people (20%)
- High energy or fuel costs (19%)
- High labour costs (18%)
- Raw material costs (14%)

Skills and training: Results from the Creative Economy Census reveals significant skills gaps amongst the workforce, with 35% reporting that they had not undertaken any formal skills-related training in their role, and 59% responding that their business or organisation experienced difficulties in providing skills-based training for its employees. Within this 37% said that their business/organisation had encountered difficulties in funding training, with this rising to 75% for respondents based in coastal communities. Furthermore, 60% reported that their business/organisation had found difficulties in recruiting suitably skilled employees.

Access to funding: Financial barriers; including difficulties securing funding, unclear eligibility criteria, and complex application processes. 54% of census responses reported 'Access to finance, including eligibility for grant' as being a barrier for their organisation. This was the general barrier that was reported by the largest number of respondents. The top four challenges encountered by respondents when seeking or using funding were, identifying funding opportunities (48%), applying to funding calls (18%), finding match funding (14%) and finding suitable funding (7%).

Networks: Respondents wanted more networking opportunities and more support accessing markets, but the form this would take varied by area. Urban respondents tended to stress brokerage and B2B [Business-to-Business] links. Rural respondents focused more on coordinated approaches to heritage and tourism, calling for "a cohesive approach to the importance of the heritage sector in regard to York and its wider environs". Coastal respondents highlighted region-wide creative sector initiatives and sector-specific networks.

- c. **What future skills, jobs, innovation and investment are needed to drive economic growth and untap cultural capital?**

The census collected a range of data about the services and interventions that those employed in the regional creative economy would most like to see. The top five most common business support initiatives that respondents said would be useful were improved access to funding (45%). While 31% cited skills and support, 22% highlighted access to spaces and 12% asked for improved networks or creative clusters.

The top five most common services that respondents said would be of value to their business/organisation were:

- Informal networking opportunities (64%)
- Marketing and promotion initiatives (64%)
- Collaborative research/development (41%)
- Training/skills programmes (40%)
- Formal networking opportunities (39%)

75% of rural respondents called for informal networking opportunities, compared with 59% of coastal respondents and 25% of urban respondents. 82% of coastal respondents requested marketing and promotion initiatives, compared with 65% of rural respondents and 25% of urban respondents. Many respondents also highlighted the need for more affordable studio and exhibiting space, with this being a particular problem in urban areas.

2. What will untap culture, skills and the talent pipeline?

a. How do we ensure all areas - urban, rural and coastal - across the North have fair access to equal opportunity to work in the jobs the cultural sector needs?

The census results revealed an imbalance in working conditions faced by workers in the creative economy, based on their surrounding geography. Typically speaking, coastal respondents reported many more difficulties with access to finance and funding. While rural respondents were more exposed to challenges with inadequate transport and access to creative networks. Urban based respondents encountered a greater number of barriers in finding affordable and suitable workspace, compared with other geographies. Successfully addressing these challenges experienced by the creative economy workforce will both directly and indirectly help to improve the equity of access to many of the jobs that support and grow the cultural sector.

b. Is poor transport and connectivity in the North damaging the cultural economy and the North's full growth potential?

Poor local and regional transport links were frequently reported as a problem by Creative Economy Census respondents, with 20% citing poor local transport as being a barrier to their business/organisation - this equated to the 6th most widely reported general barrier. Respondents reported that train travel is expensive and unreliable, roads are heavily congested and "access to high quality creativity can be a challenge for people who do not drive".

Rural respondents, in particular, felt that transport infrastructure and investment was lacking, citing the need for better access to transport and networking opportunities outside of metropolitan centres such as York. However, some urban-based respondents did refer to the strong national transport links and proximity to London, Leeds and Scotland as a positive.

c. Does culture help root young people in place, helping to break down the barriers to study and want to stay and work in the North in jobs they want to do?

Some respondents, across all geographies, reported difficulties in finding or retaining employees. Related to this, one rural respondent reported that: "talented young creatives often leave the region due to perceived lack of opportunities."