

Start Thurrock

Phase 1 Evaluation Report

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RMR



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About this report

Start Thurrock is the Creative People and Places (CPP) programme for Thurrock in Essex.

This report reviews the whole four year phase which began in April 2022¹ – as well as exploring in-depth the fourth year (April 2025 to March 2026).

Start Thurrock is funded by Arts Council England (ACE), and hosted by the Tilbury on the Thames Trust. The Consortium partners are Thurrock Council, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions CIC, Thurrock CVS and the Royal Ballet & Opera.

Our evaluation report has five sections:

- Section 1 introduces the context for the programme and details of our evaluation.
- Section 2 shares engagement figures showing reach, then outlines three approaches taken to extend these.
- Section 3 explores how Start Thurrock places quality of engagement at the heart of programming and how this grows ambition and aspiration for high quality art.
- Section 4 draws out the 'ingredients' which work and then looks at how the programme is enhancing the impact these have through partnership and modelling.
- Section 5 presents conclusions and recommendations for future phases.

Together sections 2 to 4 provide answers on how Start Thurrock is addressing the three national Research Questions that Arts Council England sets Creative People and Places Programmes (see *About Creative People and Places* below).

In addition, there are a number of supporting documents:

- *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*, written over the course of the phase, illustrate in-depth the outcomes of Start Thurrock's work.
- For a full set of *Appendices* provide additional in-depth information and analysis on the context of the report – see <https://rmresearch.uk/start-thurrock-appendices/>.



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Summary

This is the summary of the Evaluation Report for Phase 1 of Start Thurrock, the Creative People and Places (CPP) programme for Thurrock in Essex.

Our evaluation report explores the fourth year (April 2025 to March 2026) and reviews the whole four year phase which began in April 2022.

Start Thurrock is a creative community organisation that aims to engage Thurrock residents in taking the lead in creating the cultural activities they want in the local area. Projects are developed by working with communities to enable residents to make and experience ambitious, inclusive and relevant activities.

The programme is funded by Arts Council England (ACE), hosted by Tilbury on the Thames Trust and the Consortium partners are Thurrock Council, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions CIC, Thurrock CVS and the Royal Ballet & Opera.

Start Thurrock have thoughtfully and consciously curated a relevant and exciting programme of events for the people of Thurrock, chosen by the people of Thurrock. These include 287 events totalling nearly 1,000 hours of programming, from hyperlocal festivals and workshops to shows and circuses. Over the phase they have engaged a total of 88,966 people, creating real value from their extension year.

There are so many challenges in working across Thurrock, and I'm a little bit in awe of how unrelenting [Start Thurrock] are at literally smashing down doors.

Laura W, artist (sign off with Laura)

[T]hey know who they are and what they do.

Consortium member

Phase 1 in numbers



What happened?

287
exciting
events

932
hours of
delivery

251
artists
employed

What did they think?

97%
had a positive overall
experience

83%
would
recommend

Who came along?

89K
people

33%
least
likely to
engage

84%
attend
with
friends or
family

27%
new to the
arts

30%
regular
attenders

88%
from
Thurrock

Who made it happen?

5
team
members

500+
volunteers

167
partners



I took my family (aged 3 to 64) to the circus at Blackshots today and all really enjoyed it. Great to have this locally, very talented bunch of people making a fun afternoon.

Audience member

Reaching people across Thurrock

Addressing Arts Council England's Research Question 1: Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?

Building on the success of their previous years, Start Thurrock have refined their creative offer of exciting events for local people, developing the cultural demand in Thurrock.

We find that:

- **Audiences are regularly those least likely to engage with arts and culture.**
 - 72% say they don't regularly engage in the arts – Audience Spectrum analysis shows 33% come from groups least likely to engage in the arts, compared with 28% for Thurrock as a whole.
 - They are more likely (36.1%) to come from the top 30% most deprived areas of England than the average for Thurrock (25.5%).
- **Audiences are predominantly local**
 - 88% of participants across the phase came from Thurrock, with an increased reach year-on-year.
 - Start Thurrock have reached across all wards in Thurrock during the phase.

- **Audiences are diverse.**
 - They are more likely to identify as female, be aged 25-44, or be Black/Black British than the average for Thurrock.
 - Most audiences attend with friends and family (84%), 69% attend with another adult, and 59% with children aged 5-11.
- **Audiences love the events.**
 - They gave 97% positive responses to events, 88% had their expectations met or exceeded, and Start Thurrock has consistently converted 'good' experiences into 'excellent' ones.
 - Around one third of audiences are Start Thurrock regular attenders, with around one have having never attended a Start Thurrock event before.
- **Audiences are inspired to engage further**
 - 47% want to do more creative activities in future.
 - Most people would recommend to friends and family – 98% scored 7/10, a net promoter score of 81, and considered "world class".

Delivering community-led high-quality art

Addressing Arts Council England's Research Question 2: What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?

Start Thurrock delivers community-led, high-quality art. Across the phase, the quality of both the engagement process and the creative experience have been equally important.

We find that:

- **The events delivered have been of the highest quality**, consistently exceeding audience expectations.
- **Risk-taking to build ambition has been a key ingredient from the beginning** – and the results across the phase demonstrate why it matters.
- **Audiences and participants rate events very highly** on the major quality metrics, highlighting the quality of both everyday events and co-created decision-making activities.
- **The quality of the engagement process is embedded in every decision the team makes** – community voice is not a box to tick but the starting point for everything.

- **Residents have been taken on a genuine journey across the phase** – being asked what they wanted, voting on what was commissioned, shaping commissions, performing on professional stages and setting up their own organisations.
- **Building on learning across the Phase, Year 4 has been a year of refining what works**, going deeper in communities and developing new approaches that are already showing results.

[Start Thurrock's Creative Director] is constantly considering community voice... the decisions that get made are really responsive to what audiences are saying and what communities are telling her – it just keeps moving and evolving.

Consortium member

What worked and how?

Addressing Arts Council England's Research Question 3: What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?

There are clear ingredients that have made Start Thurrock's model successful and allowed it to have impact beyond the programme itself. We find that:

- **The tried and trusted approach is working** – and the good process built over four years is now reaping real rewards. Things that were hard at the start now run smoothly, freeing the team to focus on what matters most.
- **Start Thurrock is changing the cultural landscape of Thurrock** – not just through what it has delivered, but through the confidence it has built in cultural leaders, the ambition it has grown in local people, and the ways of working it has modelled for others.
- **The quality of the process has been as important as the quality of the output throughout the phase** – and the two have consistently reinforced each other.
- **Partnership working has been central to everything** – Start Thurrock has developed a clearer approach to it across the phase – with impacts that are now visible beyond Thurrock.
- **Start Thurrock is now embedded at both grassroots and strategic level** – working at both levels often simultaneously, and increasingly present in conversations that shape the wider cultural, health and community landscape of Thurrock.

- **The challenges that remain are largely those of success** – managing a growing reputation, stretching limited capacity, and asking harder questions about depth and impact.

The ingredients for success

We identify five elements to Start Thurrock's success:

1. **Strategic advocacy.** The organisation is actively putting arts on other people's agendas, being in the room when decisions are made, and making the case that culture should be embedded rather than an add-on.
2. **Thought leadership and ecosystem building.** Start Thurrock is now described by partners and evaluators as a thought leader and quality assurance agent for the wider cultural ecosystem – a role emerging from four years of consistent, values-led practice.
3. **Being values led – honesty and transparency are key.** If the process is not right, the organisation holds itself to account publicly, names what has not worked, and treats its learning as something to share. It is what makes the “permission to fail” genuine.
4. **Strength-based, asset-based approach** – tapping into the energy of people who want to be involved rather than those who don't. It is visible in the programming, approaches to hyperlocal engagement and in the thinking behind developments for the next phase.
5. **Community as advocates.** Through their own initiative community members have become part of communications and outreach. This is not because Start Thurrock asked them to, but because the quality of their experience made them want to.

Conclusion

Over the four years of Phase 1, the evidence shows that Start Thurrock has successfully delivered on the concept it originally envisioned.

That is:

- Communities in Thurrock can drive cultural decision making
- Excellent art and engagement can be delivered together, and
- The programme can learn and improve continuously over time.

The foundation is strong values set early and consistently lived, combined with the right team. This has produced a CPP that is strategically well-connected and producing quality work.

In short, **Start Thurrock is well ahead of where comparable programmes are at the same point in their journey.**

The complementary skillsets, and consistency in approach, of the Creative Director and Executive Director have been central to this.

The result is a programme that is now rated at the highest levels across every evaluation measure we use. That is both an achievement and a prompt to reassess what success looks like for the next phase.

Thurrock's cultural landscape has shifted over the phase. With the strong foundations, community trust, and an increasingly strategic presence across the Borough, **Start Thurrock is well placed for the changes ahead and ready to build on everything Phase 1 has made possible.**

Recommendations

Programme and partnerships

- **Build on the foundations to go deeper and wider** – go deeper into intensive place-based engagement and the impact on individuals and communities – go wider by building on the strategic presence and cross-sector work.
- **Protect the balance of strategic and programming work** – continue to resist the pressure to join every conversation and be deliberate about where energy goes the furthest.
- **Develop an updated narrative and elevator pitch** – articulate clearly what Start Thurrock is now, what it offers and what makes it distinctive.
- **Be more deliberate about partnerships** – use a framework to manage a growing number of relationships without losing quality or intentionality.

Organisational development and governance

- **Plan for growth and address capacity** – set out clearly in the next phase business plan how Start Thurrock intends to grow, what capacity it needs, and how the weight of the programme is shared across the team.

- **Prioritise independent governance** – follow through on the agreement to appoint a paid independent chair, and establish facilitated away days as a standing commitment.
- **Strengthen Consortium engagement.** As Start Thurrock moves into a new phase, there is an opportunity for Consortium members to play a more active role in championing the programme, supporting funding opportunities and continuing to develop governance structures.

Evaluation and evidence

- **Implement the Evaluation Reference Group** – ensuring community members have a say in evaluation design and focus, provide focused support for community data collectors and more specific observation questions.
- **Revisit evaluation tools and data collection** – restore the participatory function of engagement boards, review what is collected in new data systems, and ensure space for open qualitative responses alongside quantitative data.
- **Move towards social value measurement** – begin building the evidence base at the right touchpoints, identifying settings where before-and-after tracking is feasible.
- **Go deeper with the Core Panel and commissions** – involve panel members in the full cycle, including reviewing and reflecting on work after delivery.





1. Introduction

In this section, we introduce Thurrock, the national Creative People and Places programme and Start Thurrock itself.

1.1. Context

1.1.1. About Thurrock

Place

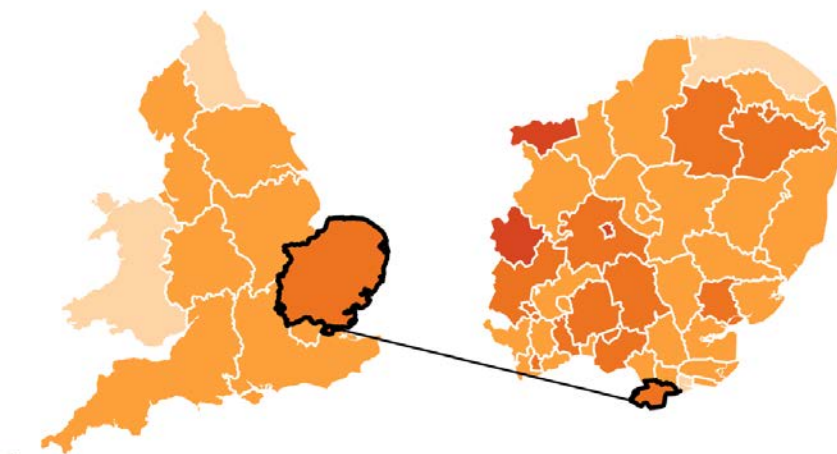


Figure 1: Thurrock's location in the UK and Eastern England. Source ONS Census 2021

Thurrock is a borough of Essex on the banks of the River Thames, east of London and within the Thames Gateway. Its main towns

are predominantly in the south (Grays, Corringham, Purfleet-on-Thames and Tilbury) with more rural villages in the north.

The area includes three major ports including Tilbury – with trade and the Thames playing an important part in the area's history². The local economy is heavily weighted towards small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) – they account for 98.4% of all businesses, though there are also large employers such as Amazon and the ports³. However, unemployment is higher in Thurrock (4.2%) than nationally (3.4%)⁴.

People

Thurrock has a population of 180,989⁵ and this is "increasing by over 10% every decade".⁶ 66.2% identify as White British – lower than the 74% average for England⁷ – and over 10% of Thurrock residents were born overseas⁸. This diversity is demonstrated by the fact that over 130 different languages are spoken by school children (as their main language)⁹.

The number of people over 65 is lower than the UK average – 14% in Thurrock (compared to 20% for the UK as a whole¹⁰) – and those under 15 years old are at a higher percentage (23% versus 18% for the UK as a whole)¹¹. This means a median age (36) which is lower than the national average¹².

The Council notes that "deprivation in Thurrock is slightly lower than the national average"¹³ – of the 98 neighbourhoods, 15 were in the 20% most income-deprived and 13 in the 20% least income-deprived¹⁴.

Life expectancy is significantly lower in Thurrock than average for both men and women and "[t]he greatest contributor to inequality in health outcomes in Thurrock is smoking."¹⁵

Politics

Thurrock is a unitary authority run by a Labour administration at time of writing. Previously it was run by the Conservatives (2021 to 2024) before passing into a period of no overall control (2024)¹⁶.

Significantly, in 2022 the Council "declared itself in financial distress and barred itself from making any non-essential spending"¹⁷ with debts of £1.5bn. The Council is likely to cease to exist as part of proposed local government reforms.

Thurrock is represented by two parliamentary constituencies – Thurrock, and the constituency of South Basildon and East Thurrock. As of the 2024 UK Parliament elections, the seats are held by Labour and an Independent (originally elected as a Reform candidate)¹⁸.

Arts engagement and local cultural sector

Audience Spectrum data suggests arts engagement in Start Thurrock's target area¹⁹ is lower than in the surrounding region²⁰. 81% of Start Thurrock's target audience are from groups less likely to engage in the arts compared with 57% less likely to engage in the surrounding area²¹.

Newer DCSM figures tell a slightly different story. They define arts engagement more broadly – to include, for example, reading, painting or going to a comedy gig. Those figures show that 89% of adults in Thurrock actively engaged with the arts – similar to the national average²².

However, other indicators of cultural engagement remain lower than average. 56% of people in Thurrock have visited a heritage

site in the last year (compared to 67% nationally) – 33% have visited a museum or gallery (compared to 42% nationally)²³.

Thurrock's cultural sector has been developing over the period of Start Thurrock's operation, with more cross-organisation working and greater involvement of a cultural offer within wider economic partnerships. New cultural sector work includes the expansion of the work of the Tilbury on the Thames Trust (Start Thurrock's parent organisation) into cultural delivery as well as community development, and the development of a new Thurrock Plan for Culture²⁴ which is at action planning stage as we write.

1.1.2. About Creative People and Places

Creative People and Places²⁵ (CPP) is an Arts Council England (ACE) funding programme which aims to engage new people in the arts through commissioning projects in areas of low arts engagement.

CPPs focus on providing a cultural offer which is excellent in terms of process and product, through building new and unusual partnerships beyond the arts. The CPP programme began in 2012 and has seen a reported investment of "£162m in local community, grassroots and cultural organisations".²⁶

Today there are 38 CPPs in England²⁷. In the next round of funding (2026 to 2029), this will grow to 46 – including Start Thurrock as one of ten CPPs in the South East²⁸. The new round also refines the overall aims for the fund and sees an investment of £43 million²⁹.

Extension year

CPPs are normally funded for three years. However, ACE announced in September 2023³⁰ an extension year to "provide security and stability to existing CPPs, and more time to develop plans for those interested in applying to the next portfolio".³¹

This was in recognition of the challenges faced after the Covid pandemic and during a time of increasing cost and complexity. Start Thurrock successfully secured this extension – so having started in April 2022, its first phase continued until 31 March 2026.

Research Questions

Arts Council England asks CPPs to consider three Research Questions (RQs) in their reporting which give a sense of the strategic objectives of the programme:

1. Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?
2. What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?
3. What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?

The answers to these questions form the basis of sections 2, 3 and 4 of this report.

1.1.3. About Start Thurrock

Here in Thurrock, everyone is creative, anyone can create and all are inspired to forge a new Thurrock story together, whoever we are.

Start Thurrock Business Plan 2023-2025³²

Start Thurrock is the Creative People and Places programme for Thurrock. It works in partnership with local people to help them "choose, produce and take part in brilliant arts and cultural experiences"³³ on their doorstep.

Their Business Plan identifies two key ways this will be achieved:

- "Choice and decision-making about the local cultural offer will be put in the hands of residents. We'll kick-start a power shift that encourages residents to increasingly take control of what cultural activity and experiences take place locally."
- "The principles of Action Research will underpin everything we do. Put simply, we will learn by doing."³⁴

In addition, there is a clear commitment to programmes being "inclusive, inspirational and innovative" – and ensuring Start Thurrock's approach is "rooted, respectful and responsive".³⁵

As a creative community organisation, Start Thurrock aims to empower Thurrock residents to take the lead in what they want to create, see or experience in their place. Projects are formed by listening and working with communities to enable residents to select, make and experience ambitious, inclusive and relevant cultural activities.

Start Thurrock's overall aims are to have more arts and cultural opportunities, involve more people in them and, in the longer term, to create a viable arts industry in Thurrock.

Team and Consortium

Over the phase, the composition of the team has changed with only the Executive Director and Creative Director remaining constant. The current team is made up of an Executive Director, Creative Director, Engagement Producer and a Programme Coordinator – and this appears a settled and successful arrangement.

The Consortium is led by the Tilbury on the Thames Trust with other partners being Thurrock Community Voluntary Service (Thurrock CVS), the Royal Ballet & Opera, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions and Thurrock Council.

1.2. About the evaluation

We have worked closely with Start Thurrock during Phase 1 to embed and adapt evaluation processes that work for them, their programme and their communities. As Start Thurrock begin Phase 2, we are delighted to be able to continue our evaluation, evolving our approach alongside Start Thurrock's new aims and ambition.

The evaluation centres around our co-created Story of Change to share the story of Start Thurrock, with an embedded Evaluation Framework that sits behind it, designed to ensure data requirements are met while being mindful of resources and capacity and leave a legacy of skills and confidence in using the methods. Further details about our evaluation, Story of Change, Evaluation Framework, methods and data sources for this report

can be found in the *Appendices* (see <https://rmresearch.uk/start-thurrock-appendices/>).

1.3. The delivery

Start Thurrock aimed to energise 84,887 residents across Thurrock to forge a confident new arts-led narrative post-pandemic. Over the phase they have **engaged a total of 88,966 people**³⁶:

- 1,600 in Year 1
- 29,195 in Year 2
- 28,207 in Year 3
- 31,564 in Year 4 – extension year

Postcode analysis shows that on average 88% of audiences come from Thurrock, so this means Start Thurrock have reached an estimated 78,290 residents. These figures show they have almost **achieved their goal** by reaching over 78k residents of Thurrock (target was 85k), with a total audience of almost 89k including those from other (mainly nearby) areas over the course of the phase. It also really highlights **the value Start Thurrock have been able to create** from their extension funding, building on their previous successes and reaching more people than ever. Their reach is likely to be even higher due to events that are harder to quantify engagement for, such as the tile mural in collaboration with Thurrock and Brentwood Mind.

Over the phase, Start Thurrock have **thoughtfully and consciously curated a relevant and exciting programme** of events for the people of Thurrock, chosen by the people of Thurrock.

The most common art forms included visual arts (18%), theatre (17%) and outdoor arts (14%). The majority of events in this phase (79%) had universal appeal, with nearly half (48%) targeted at families. Further in-depth analysis on this broken down by programming year can be found in *Appendix 3 – Full Analysis*.

Here we briefly outline the key elements of the programme. Firstly, in Year 4 there were two annual events to highlight:

- *Green Light*³⁷ (February 2026): A two-week programme of free creative workshops.
- *Big Lunches* and *Picnic in the Park*³⁸ (summer 2025): Free, community-led events held in eight green spaces throughout Thurrock.

Other notable events in the phase include:

- *Nose Dive Assembly – Birds of a Feather...*³⁹ (April 2025), a show from Revel Puck Circus⁴⁰ in a big top involving a 10-day residency and culmination of work developed over several years – see Case study 2: From pebbles in pots to Big Top (2025, 2026) in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.
- *Teatro Vivo Community Play in Purfleet, 'The Myths of the Marshes'*⁴¹ (June 2025), a show co-created with residents and inspired by Purfleet's connection to Bram Stoker and Dracula – see Case study 5: Risk taking for ambition and quality (2026) in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.
- *Kids Business*⁴² (July 2025) saw children imagining their favourite shop and working with live art duo Hunt & Darton to make this a reality – see Case study 5: Risk taking for ambition and quality (2026) in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.

- *Afro Food Festival*⁴³ (August 2025), which brought together the best of Afro Caribbean music and culture.
- *Orsett Show 2025*⁴⁴ (September 2025), in which Start Thurrock brought performances and activities to this large-scale annual community event.
- A new artist commission, with Essex Cultural Diversity Project, centred around *Coalhouse Fort*⁴⁵ (October 2025). Commissioned artist, Laura Trevail, engaged the public and marginalised groups with the Fort through various activities which explored a site of historical interest⁴⁶ – see Case study 5: Risk taking for ambition and quality (2026) in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.
- *The Big Reveal: Mural Celebrations*⁴⁷ (December 2025), which featured co-created murals developed in Grays with local communities and partner Brentwood Mind⁴⁸.
- *KIT Theatre Musical in a Day and skills workshops* (2025: Working with young people at Green Light, KIT Theatre provided an immersive experience at Thameside Theatre alongside KIT's artists.

Many are explored in further depth in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.

2. Reaching people across Thurrock

Building on the success of their previous years, Start Thurrock have refined and honed their creative, curated offer of relevant and exciting events for local people, developing the cultural demand in Thurrock.

[There were] highlights from all the events. I got to know my area more, learn new skills, visit venues I'd never been to, meet members of my community. I got to experience this with my kids.

Audience member

Here we explore Start Thurrock's reach across the whole of Phase 1, with a special look at Year 4. We identify headlines around who Start Thurrock have reached over this time, and what they thought of the programme. This section also addresses Art's Council's Research Question 1:

Are more people from places of least engagement experiencing and inspired by creativity and culture and what are the most effective ways to achieve this?

ACE RQ1

We find that:

- **Audiences are regularly those least likely to engage with arts and culture**
 - 72% say they don't regularly engage in the arts.
 - Audience Spectrum analysis shows that 33% of audiences come from groups least likely to engage in the arts, compared with 28% for Thurrock.
 - They are more likely (36.1%) to come from the top 30% most deprived areas of England than the average for Thurrock (25.5%).
- **Audiences are predominantly local**
 - 88% of audience members and participants across the phase came from Thurrock, with an increased spread year on year.
 - Start Thurrock have reached across all wards in Thurrock during the phase.
- **Audiences are diverse**
 - They are more likely to identify as female, to be 25-44 or to be Black/Black British than the average for Thurrock.
 - Most audiences attended with friends and family (84%), while 69% attended with another adult and 59% with children aged 5-11.
- **Audiences love the events**
 - They gave 97% positive responses to events, and 88% had their expectations met or exceeded.

- Start Thurrock have consistently converted 'good' experiences into 'excellent' ones.
- Around one third of audiences are Start Thurrock regular attenders, with around one half having never attended a Start Thurrock event before.

- **Audiences are inspired to engage further**

- Most people would recommend to friends and family - 98% scored 7/10 or above which converts to a net promoter score of 81, considered 'world class' by survey experts Qualtrics.
- 47% want to do more creative activities in future.

More in-depth analysis of this section including further charts can be found in *Appendix 3 – Full analysis report*.

2.1. Who it reached

Here we outline who Start Thurrock reached across the phase. The infographic and text below show the headline facts about audiences, and further information and charts can be found in *Appendix 3 – Full analysis report*.

2.1.1. Geographic reach

88% of audience members and participants across the phase came from Thurrock. Exploring the postcode data, we find that Start Thurrock have **reached all wards** across Thurrock over the phase.

The maps in Figure 3 show the full reach across the phase. It shows that Start Thurrock have **drawn audiences from across England**, covering an area of 56,453.3 km²⁴⁹.



Figure 2: Map showing reach across the phase. Blue = 23/24, green = 24/25 and red = 25/26. Base = 6,309 postcodes

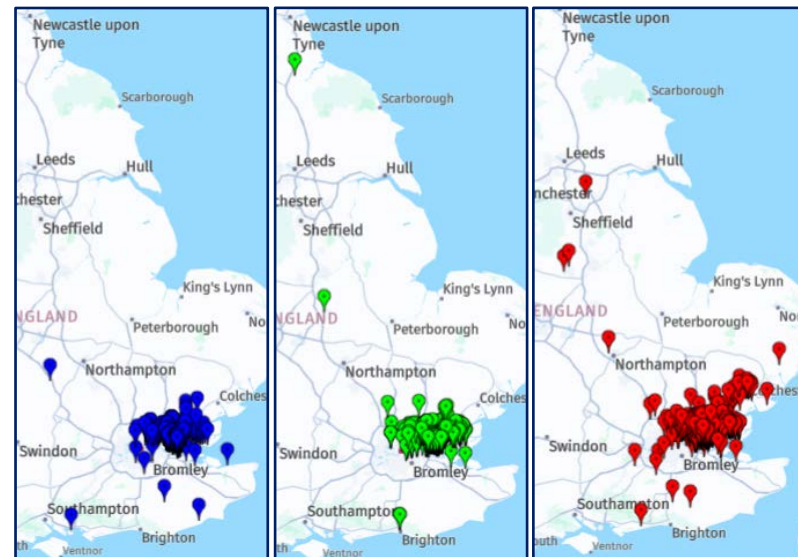


Figure 3: Maps comparing reach by year. Blue = 23/24, green = 24/25 and red = 25/26. Base = 6,309 postcodes

Illuminate data shows that they have also reached an international audience, with some audience members reporting they live in Romania, Spain and India. The blue dots show reach for 23-24, green for 24-25 and red for 25-26.

The map in Figure 2 focuses on the Thurrock region. Icons overlap so are not all visible in areas, but this shows consistent pockets of engagement in Start Thurrock's hyper-local areas of Purfleet, South Ockendon and Chadwell, showing the success of their hyper-local programming model.

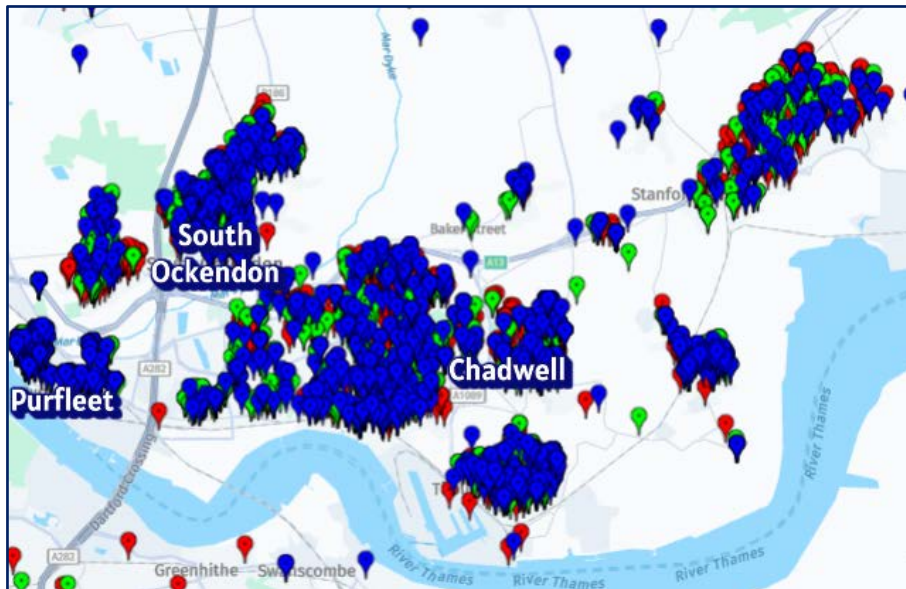


Figure 2: Map focusing on reach across Thurrock region by year. Blue = 23/24, green = 24/25 and red = 25/26. Base = 6,309 postcodes

2.1.2. Demographic reach

Start Thurrock audiences largely tend to be female, but Start Thurrock are **reaching progressively more people who identify as male**, with 1 in 5 identifying as male in 25-26, for a phase average of 81% female, 18% male and 1% non-binary.

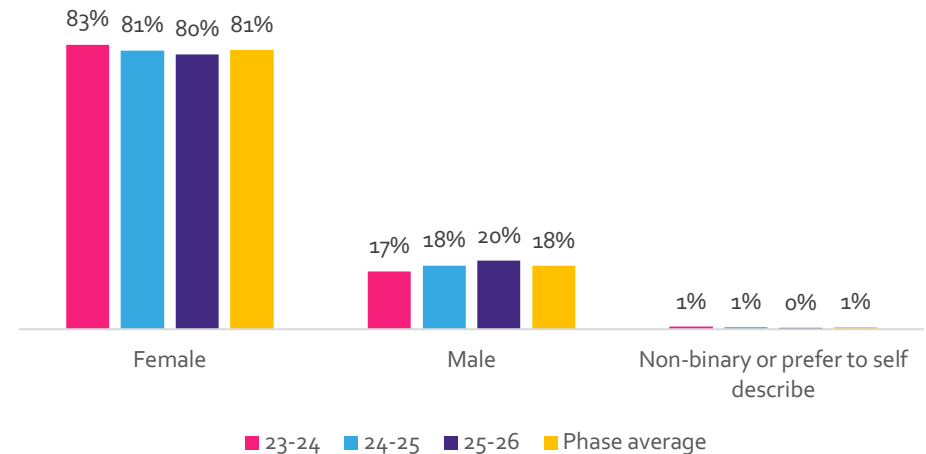


Figure 3: Sex/ gender identity. Base = 1,445

On average, 7% of audiences during the phase identified as LGBTQIA+. This was highest during 25-26 at 10%. On average, audience members are **far more likely to be aged 25 to 44** than the average for the Thurrock population.

Slightly fewer people from Start Thurrock audiences (10%) **identify as D/deaf, disabled** or as having a long-term health condition than from the general population of Thurrock (17%). Reach was highest during the 23-24 year.

Reaching people across Thurrock



Start Thurrock have reached people across Thurrock this phase, engaging them in arts and culture that leaves them wanting more.

New Audiences

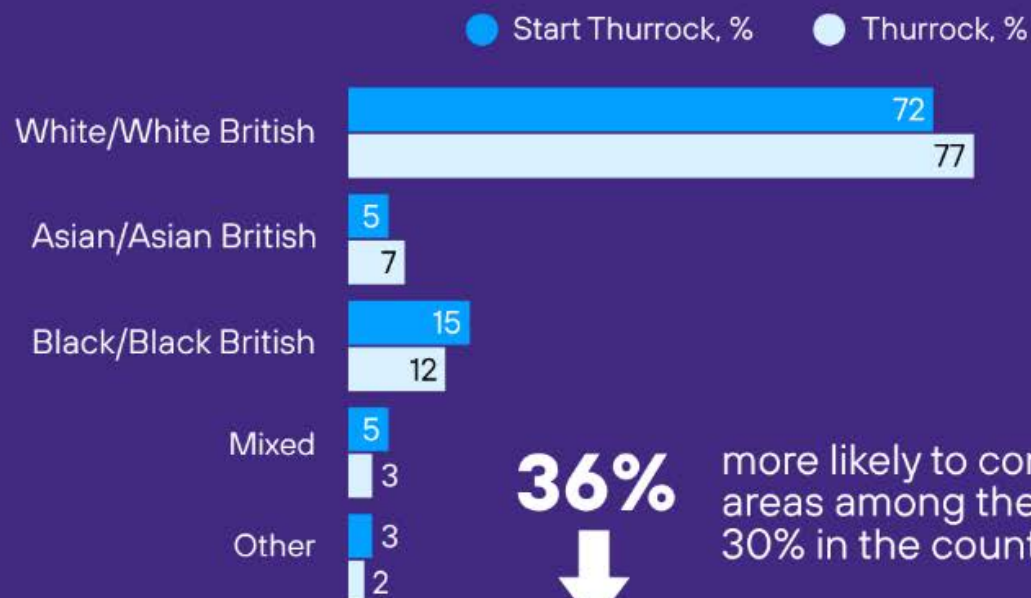
27% attended Start Thurrock as their first arts and culture experience

72% don't regularly engage in arts and culture activities

What people said

Fun
Great
Entertaining
Amazing
Enjoyable

Who attended



36% more likely to come from areas among the poorest 30% in the country



10% higher than the Thurrock population

87% were from Thurrock

A similar number of audience members identify as neurodivergent, 13% on average over the phase.

Start Thurrock audiences are **most likely to come from managerial and professional occupations**, and this is almost twice as likely as for the population of England.

Start Thurrock have been increasing their reach into groups with intermediate occupations across the phase. Further targeted programming could help reach those with routine and manual occupations in the next phase.

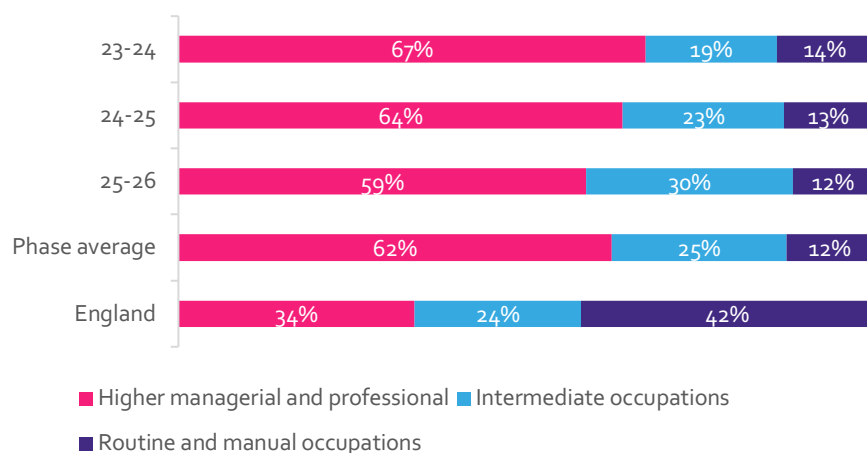


Figure 4: Socio-economic group of Start Thurrock audiences against average for England (ONS NSSEC). Base = 603

Start Thurrock audiences are typically **less likely to be White and more likely to be Black/ Black British** than the Thurrock population in general, although 25-26 figures show reach largely in line with the Thurrock population.

Across the phase, **the large majority of audiences attended with their friends and family** (84%), 11% by themselves, 3% through an organised group visit and 2% other. No one answered 'school/college/university visit', and this could be something to explore in the next phase. Of those who attended with others, around **two-thirds came along with other adults** (69%), **59% came along with children aged 5 to 11**, around **a third brought along very young children** aged 0 to 4 (36%) and almost **a fifth brought teenagers** 12 to 15.

Over **a quarter of audiences had not been to a cultural event prior to attending** Start Thurrock's event. When we look at those who attended three or fewer cultural events in a year or less for the entire phase, we find that **72% are not regular arts engagers**. Charts and further analysis can be found in *Appendix 3 – Full analysis report*. To explore this further, we conducted postcode analysis to understand the current engagement of Start Thurrock audiences.

2.1.3. Reaching those least likely to engage

Here we consider the extent to which Start Thurrock CPP have reached audiences who are traditionally least likely to engage in arts and culture activities. We present the results of two pieces of analysis of audience postcodes. The first is Indices of Multiple Deprivation analysis⁵⁰.

Indices of Multiple Deprivation

Indices of Deprivation are an official way of measuring levels of deprivation in local authorities in England. They rank local authorities using a number of metrics such as employment, income, health deprivation and crime.

The graphic below shows that Thurrock is in the more deprived half of the country, as it is more deprived than 61% of other local authorities in England.

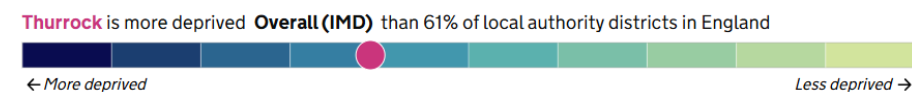


Figure 5: Source <https://deprivation.communities.gov.uk/maps>

Figure 8 shows the levels of deprivation for Start Thurrock engagements for the whole phase, compared with those for the Thurrock and England populations as a whole. It shows the proportion of people who live in each 'decile' – the lower the decile the higher the levels of deprivation, with 1 being the 10% most deprived areas of England.

This shows that levels of extreme deprivation are relatively low in Thurrock (4%) as well as for Start Thurrock engagements (4.2%) compared with the 10% most deprived areas nationally. However,

Start Thurrock audiences across the phase are **substantially more likely to come from the 30% most deprived areas of England** (36.1%) than the Thurrock population (25.5%). It is worth noting that **this number is trending down as audience sizes have increased year on year**: 37.7% in 23-24, 36.9% in 24-25 and 33.7% in 25-26, as the reach into these groups that fall within the most deprived areas is 'diluted' by strong attendance in groups with less deprivation. Overall, this shows that Start Thurrock **are doing well to reach those who will benefit most from their programming**.

Audience Spectrum

Audience Spectrum⁵¹ analysis uses postcode data to categorise audiences into three levels of arts and culture engagement: low, medium and high.

Overall, we find that **33% of Start Thurrock audiences come from groups least likely to engage** in arts and culture activities, **compared to 28% of the Thurrock population** in general, meaning

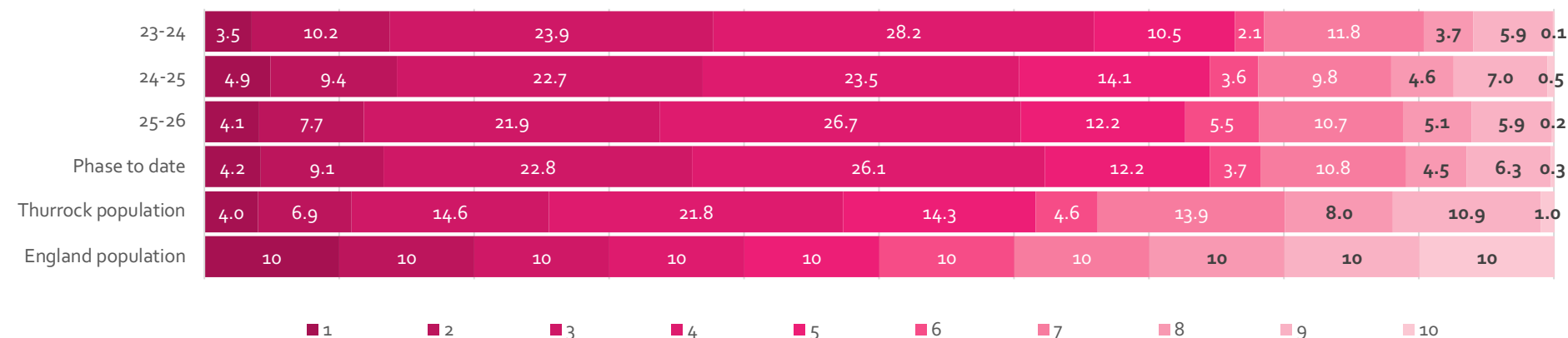


Figure 6: Indices of Multiple Deprivation analysis. Base = 5,056

that Start Thurrock are **successfully reaching those least likely to engage** with their targeted programming.

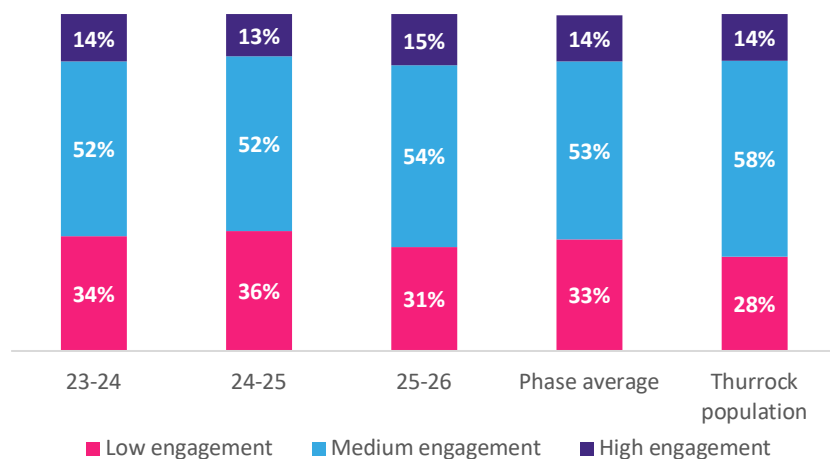


Figure 7: Simplified Audience Spectrum engagement comparison. Base = 6,230

The chart in Figure 8 shows the detailed reach for Start Thurrock audiences (blue bars) compared with the population of Thurrock as a whole (pink bars) for each of the 10 distinct groups.

In Phase 1, Start Thurrock were particularly targeting Frontline Families early in the phase, with excellent reach into this group of 18% on average across the phase compared to 13% for the population of Thurrock on average. Trips and Treats became another focus later in the phase, with reach into this group largely in line with the population (34% Start Thurrock compared with 35% Thurrock population), again showing great reach into their target audiences during the phase. More on these groups can be found in *Appendix 3 – Full analysis report*.

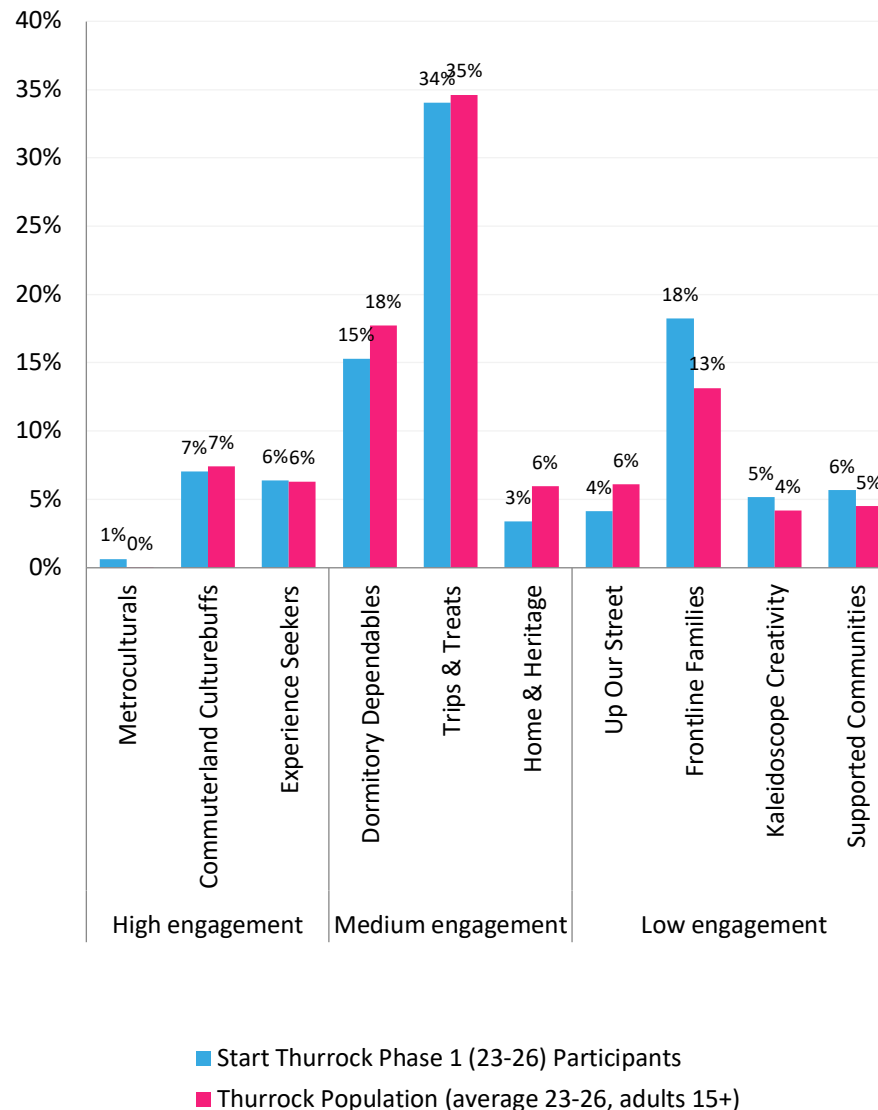


Figure 8: Audience Spectrum analysis. Base = 6,230

2.2. What did people think?

Here we explore what audiences and participants thought about events across the phase. For further analysis and charts, please see *Appendix 3 – Full analysis report*.

The atmosphere at events across all years of this phase has been one of **excitement and enjoyment**. Overall, **88% of audience members felt the events met or exceeded their expectations**. Audiences have continued to rate events very highly – across the phase 97% said they were excellent (72%) or good (25%), with hardly any neutral or negative ratings.

Impressively, these ratings have been climbing year on year too. The chart below shows how **Start Thurrock have consistently been converting 'good' experiences into 'excellent' ones**.

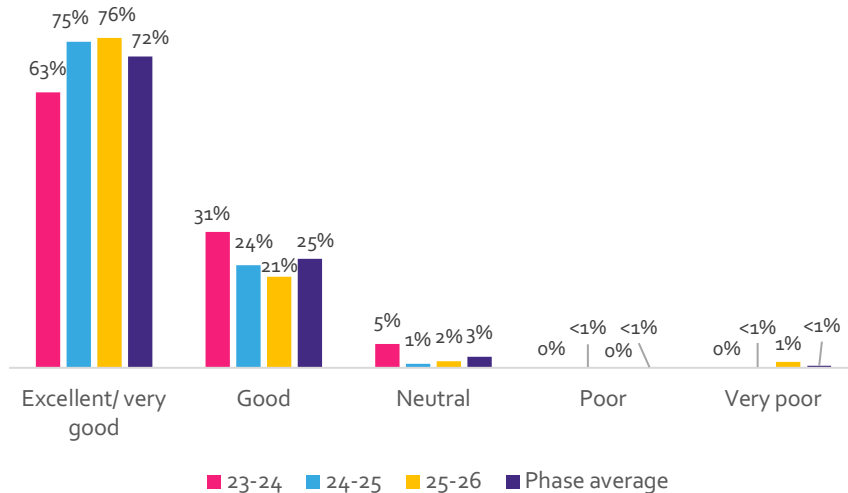


Figure 9: Audience Spectrum analysis. Base = 1,400

When asked if they **would recommend Start Thurrock events** to friends and family, 98% scored a 7 or above out of 10. We used this to calculate the Net Promotor score, taken as the percentage of promoters (those who score 9 or 10), less the percentage of detractors (those that score 0-6). Start Thurrock events have a Net Promotor Score of 81, which is ranked as 'world class' by survey experts Qualtrics.⁵²

Children have been encouraged to join in with events, and the Start Thurrock team have built good relationships with their audiences through their **warm, inclusive and friendly approach**.

I took my family to the circus at Blackshots today; we range from 64 years old to 3 years old and all really enjoyed it... [It] was great to have something like this locally, very talented bunch of people making a fun afternoon.

Loved seeing my 5 year old amazed and excited by the performance.

The set up of the space was very accommodating for younger children; the songs and interactions with the children made this event extra enjoyable.

Audience members

Audience members enjoyed the chance to engage with their community and learn new skills or have new experiences. 60% interacted with new people, 56% learned something new, 49% had an increased sense of wellbeing and 47% were inspired to do more creative activities in the future.

93% felt the events helped them feel more part of their community. Some were experiencing things for the very first time, such as tightrope walking and other circus activities.

As well as providing skills and good role models, events highlighted and **celebrated diversity, and felt inclusive.**

A lovely day out with family, and supporting all communities. As a returning gay resident who has not been home in years, it is reassuring to see the progress and support of the local community.

Impressive family show for all ages! Great role models especially for young girls! Great to see diversity in Thurrock.

A lovely selection of snacks provided – was great to see some snacks suitable for those with allergies/intolerances.

[The highlight of the event was] seeing my children enjoy getting involved with the experience. My son has autism and watching him get involved and being creative was so lovely to see. He enjoyed it so much [and] I could see he didn't feel too anxious [at] the event.

Audience members

The events also made audiences **see their local area in a new light** and **91% felt more pride in their local area.**

It was a lovely atmosphere – we live opposite the site, and it was lovely to have [the] big top on the field [and] look out of our front room to see it lit up with festoon lights.

As I walked around the Grays Park, I literally was thinking I could be anywhere – Paris, London, Milan or any culture city – not in a Park in Grays which quite frankly is a no-go area after dark! It was amazing, and what a turn out [of] people of all ages from every part of our community.

Audience members

People found the events **surprising and exciting:**

Very original performance, from music to artist. I loved it. Didn't know what to expect but was blown away [by] the whole production.

I didn't really expect to enjoy it. However, I would recommend the show to absolutely everyone. It was gentle and inclusive.

Audience members

Due to the high quality events, people were excited to come back and **engage further.**

It was very well organised, and everyone was very welcoming. The ladies running the session were very

helpful and patient. It was so good; we would definitely be interested in attending other workshops in the future. Thank you.

Audience member

As the phase has gone on, the most popular way audiences have found out about events has increasingly been Facebook or other social media, with almost half finding out this way. A third found out through word of mouth, and the email newsletter was another popular option.

People were really **grateful for the experiences they had** by engaging with Start Thurrock.

Well done to all involved. A lot of effort and planning clearly went into this and [it was] brought together beautifully. Much appreciated.

Audience member

Start Thurrock's **fun and welcoming atmosphere** also extends to their data collection via methods such as 'Pots and Pebbles'. At events, Start Thurrock team members set up tents with a series of pots arranged on tables and posed a question to audiences: 'What type of activity would you like to see more of where you live?'. Audiences most want Music (12%) and Dance (12%), followed by Theatre (10%), Magic (10%) and Carnival (9%).

When comparing the requests via Pots and Pebbles to the event types Start Thurrock have put on over the phase we can compare the programming with audience appetite. This shows an appetite for further dance and music events. Craft was also a popular option

chosen by audiences. A breakdown and chart can be found in *Appendix 3 – Full analysis report*.

This light-hearted, interactive data collection tool has proven very successful, with 3,188 responses over the phase, providing one of their most engaged with data collection methods. This confidence of their audiences to ask for what they want to see is covered in our case studies.

2.3. Reaching new audiences – extending reach

Start Thurrock is **deliberate with where it delivers**, from big events that pull people in, to sustained hyperlocal presence that goes to people on their own terms. This supports and extends reach.

Other ways in which this has worked well include:

- The Big Lunches – this model demonstrates what partnership can do for reach that no single organisation could achieve alone. By combining Thurrock Community and Voluntary Services (Thurrock CVS), the Council, Active Essex and Start Thurrock's grassroots connections, the combined reach was greater than the sum of its parts – and sustained presence year on year meant people were not just attending once but engaging more deeply over time.
- Going to where communities already are – bingo clubs, food banks, parks, libraries – has been one of the most consistent and effective ways Start Thurrock extends its reach. Close to 200 people took part in creative consultations held in everyday community spaces in autumn 2025, and 70% of circus

audiences at Blackshots were engaging with Start Thurrock for the first time. The communities least likely to seek culture out are most likely to be reached when culture comes to them.

- Familiar, low-barrier entry points – Christmas craft, hands-on making, activities connected to what groups already do – have drawn people in who would not have come to a conventional arts event. Artists are chosen for their ability to adapt and work with whoever is in the room, at times that suit the community rather than the programme.

Together, these approaches reflect a programme that understands reaching the least engaged is not about marketing harder – **it is about showing up consistently, in the right places, with the right offer, on people's own terms.**



3. Delivering community-led high-quality art

This section explores how Start Thurrock delivers community-led, high-quality art – and how the quality of the engagement process and the quality of the creative experience have been held together as equally important across the whole phase.

This thing happening in this place - I can't believe this is here. It's the sort of thing you'd expect to see in Southend.

Audience member

Here we explore how Start Thurrock are delivering community-led high-quality art. We also answer Art's Council's Research Question 2:

What approaches enable us to deliver on our aspiration for excellence, both in the process of community engagement and the creative and cultural experiences on offer?

ACE RQ2

We find that:

- Start Thurrock has made a huge step forward from the beginning of the phase and is now running well – **they know their communities in depth, they programme excellent work, and they treat the quality of the engagement process and the quality of the creative experience as equally important.**
- Audiences and participants rate events very highly on all Impacts & Insights dimensions, highlighting the **quality of both everyday events and co-created decision-making activities.**
- **Risk taking for ambition and quality** has been a key ingredient of Start Thurrock's approach from the start – the permission to fail, to commission with open outcomes and to back a process rather than a product is something the team actively creates for artists, for communities and for themselves.
- The **quality of the engagement process is embedded in every decision** the team makes – community voice is not a box to tick but the starting point for everything.
- **Communities have been put in the driving seat of cultural decision making** in a place where that had not happened before.
- **Residents have been taken on a genuine journey across the phase** – from being asked what they wanted, to voting on what was commissioned, to shaping commissions, to performing on professional stages and setting up their own organisations.

- **Start Thurrock continue to innovate:** Building on development and learning across the phase, Year 4 has been a year of honing – refining what works, going deeper in communities and developing new approaches that are already showing results.
- Start Thurrock has become a **fixed and distinctive part of Thurrock's cultural landscape**. By being clear about its own role, it has helped other organisations understand and define theirs.
- **External organisations** are increasingly **drawn to work in Thurrock**, and quality work is being attracted rather than just delivered.

I developed a respectful and quite strong understanding of what Start's principles are. They grew in my respect as an arts organisation.

Laura Whiting, artist

3.1. Successes and learning across the phase

Start Thurrock set out to **put communities in the driving seat of cultural decision making in a place where that had not happened before**. Over four years, the team have achieved this – and more. What started as a new CPP testing the community-led approach has become an established organisation that is recognised as **a trusted voice in Thurrock's cultural ecosystem, and that others look to as a model for how to work**.

We find that Start Thurrock has made a huge step forward from the beginning of the phase. The team have built strong foundations: **they know their communities in depth, they programme excellent work, and they treat the quality of the engagement process and the quality of the creative experience as equally important**.

This has resulted in **high quality events that consistently exceed audience expectations, residents who feel heard and in control, and partners who have grown in their understanding and appreciation of what arts and culture can do**.

Across the phase, residents have been taken on a journey – from being asked what they wanted, to voting on what was commissioned, to shaping commissions, to performing on professional stages, to setting up their own organisations and securing their own funding. This is what growing community ambition looks like in practice.

Alongside this, Start Thurrock has become a **fixed and distinctive part of Thurrock's cultural landscape**. By being clear about its own role, it has helped other organisations understand and define theirs. Partners now come to Start Thurrock rather than waiting to be approached, and the ways of working Start Thurrock has modelled – including community-led decision making, open commissioning, starting where people are – are being taken up by others.

Year 4 shows a **programme that is still innovating and has not stood still**. The move into co-commissioning new work, the development of the Super Fans network, deeper engagement in hyperlocal communities, and growing strategic advocacy for arts across health, local government and the wider ecosystem all

represent a consolidation of learning from the first three years – and a clear jumping-off point for the next phase. Start Thurrock knows what works, knows its audiences, and is now asking the right questions about what comes next.

The ways in which this has **multiplied beyond the programme itself – influencing partners, spreading practice, and generating impact** that outlasts individual projects – are explored in depth in Case study 5: Risk taking for ambition and quality (2026) in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.

I want to say unrelenting – in a good way. There are so many challenges in working across Thurrock, and I’m a little bit in awe of how unrelenting they are at literally smashing down doors.

Laura Whiting, artist

3.2. Year 4 successes and learning

Year 4 has been a **year of honing – refining what works** rather than starting from scratch. Green Light, now in its third year, is the clearest example: most events sold out within two weeks, communities know what to expect, partners know their roles, and the programme runs more smoothly as a result. External organisations are increasingly drawn to work in Thurrock, and quality work is being attracted rather than just delivered.

The **Super Fans network has grown steadily** to almost 300 people with peaks of new people joining at each Green Light as the programme reaches those already invested in what Start Thurrock does. Super Fans are not simply repeat attenders – they actively

advocate to people the team has never met, spreading the programme through networks that sit beyond Start Thurrock's own reach. This community-led word of mouth has become part of how Start Thurrock reaches new people, sitting alongside more formal marketing and complementing it in ways that no amount of social media spend can replicate.

Underpinning all of this is a **team structure and set of systems** that took significant effort to establish but have enabled things to run smoothly. Crucially, this has freed the Creative Director to do the creative director role properly – including the external research and learning that feeds directly into programming decisions. Getting the infrastructure right has not just made administration more efficient – it has protected and enabled the quality of the creative offer itself. This is explored further in the next section.

One of the consistent challenges across the phase has been **getting adults to move from watching to taking part**. At the Big Lunches and Let's Play, community researchers observed that adults tended to be spectators to participatory activity – present and engaged, but on the sidelines while children joined in. This pattern has been live throughout the phase and has not been fully resolved.

Year 4 showed progress. **Green Light saw more adults – including men on their own – actively making and participating than in previous years**. The shift has not happened by chance. The learning has been that the type of activity on offer matters more than almost anything else. Rather than completely changing what is programmed, the approach has been to think carefully about which element of an activity will work as a way in for a particular

group – putting in something that might not initially seem interesting to them, but that connects to something they do value.

Craft-based, hands-on making has been the clearest example: familiar enough not to feel exposing, skilled enough to feel worthwhile, and with clear pathways to continue beyond the event if people want to. The aim is not to disguise the activity but to show people a way in – and then let the activity speak for itself. The gap is narrowing in certain settings. The next phase will build on what Year 4 has shown about which activities and contexts make that shift most likely to happen.

Depth-led heritage craft emerged as a distinctive part of the offer. Basket-making and acrylics at Green Light sold out fastest and generated the clearest signal of unmet need – with artists creating additional sessions to meet demand. This is not a new activity type, but the evidence that depth-focused, skilled heritage craft is specifically what Thurrock adults want, and that it works, is a Year 4 finding that matters.

What makes this particularly significant is that it does not have to stop at a single session. Local organisations in Thurrock already offer heritage craft activities, which means that someone who comes to a Green Light session and finds they love basket-making has somewhere to go next. The Taster event opens the door. Start Thurrock is **providing the first step on a pathway that already exists locally, connecting people to provision** they did not know was available or did not feel was for them. With heritage funding opportunities also emerging in Thurrock, there is real potential to develop this further in the next phase.

The extension year has also involved a **deliberate stretching of where Start Thurrock delivers**. The creative consultations in

Aveley, South Ockendon and East Tilbury took the programme into bingo clubs, lunch clubs, food banks, and libraries – spaces where arts activity is not expected, and where residents may actively resist anything that announces itself as ‘art’. The artists selected for this work were chosen precisely because they are socially engaged with a grounded, inclusive approach and a down-to-earth communication style that could be adapted to suit different audiences.

Close to 200 people took part across the sessions, but the engagement was earned through **patience, repetition and deep listening** rather than a single well-promoted event. People who initially said arts and crafts were not for them stayed for three hours. Children led participation and adults followed.

Conversations deepened the longer people stayed. This is a slow way of working – but it is the way that reaches people who would not come to a conventional arts event, and who are precisely the people Start Thurrock exists to reach. The groundwork laid in Year 4 in these spaces is what makes sustained, trusted presence in the next phase possible.

I don’t think about arts and crafts and that being for me. I think of it as being for children – but I have loved it!

Participant

I thought you needed skills to be creative, and this has proved to me that you don't. It actually doesn't matter what you end up with. I've just enjoyed doing it.

Participant

Chadwell in Action represents something new in Year 4 – a community convening model where change happened without new funding and without Start Thurrock leading from the front. The kickboxing club next door to the venue, which never usually engages, came. People who had not previously connected found themselves in the same room, working on something together.

The Q3 learning discussion described it as replicable elsewhere – a model of bringing a community together around a shared agenda that works precisely because Start Thurrock has done enough groundwork over time that the community has the confidence and connections to act for itself.

One of the more subtle shifts in Year 4 has been in how **culturally specific programming** is landing. In a previous year, a Black-led storytelling event prompted a response from some audience members that it was not for them – said as a criticism.

At Afrobeats in Year 4, the dynamic was different. The audience was predominantly Black British, and what stood out was that they genuinely welcomed seeing people unlike them participating alongside them. The event felt like it was for them – and inclusive of everyone at the same time. That is a meaningful distinction, and one Start Thurrock has been working towards.

The intention has always been to programme for everybody – not to create separate offers for separate communities, but to create things that feel genuinely relevant and welcoming to specific communities while remaining open to all. Year 4's programme, included events, such as Grandad Anansi family theatre show at the Thameside during Black History Month, which suggest that Start Thurrock is getting closer to achieving that in practice, not just in principle.

Risk taking for ambition and quality continues to be a key ingredient of Start Thurrock's approach and success in Year 4. This isn't accidental but deliberate, weighed and built into how the team works. The permission to fail, to commission with open outcomes and to back a process rather than a product is something the team actively creates for artists, for communities and for themselves.

The results across the phase – work that could not have been specified in a brief, audiences commenting on artistic quality for the first time, a Consortium that has moved from anxiety about risk to appetite for it – are a direct consequence of that commitment. This is explored in depth in Case study 5: Risk taking for ambition and quality (2026) in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.

You get into situations where they say take a risk and they don't mean it – they mean prove yourself. Here, people were saying, 'No, really, we want to learn.' And that actually being welcomed is uncommon.

Laura Trevail, artist

3.3. Partnership working – On Your Marks, Get Set, Go!

In the Year 2 report, Start Thurrock identified four types of partnership:

- Supporting organisations to embed creative activity into their own work
- Adding a small creative element to an already planned event
- Co-organising new shared activity
- Co-funding events to make something bigger than either partner could manage alone.

Knowing the type of partnership, and being honest about it early, has been one of the most important things the programme has learned across the phase.

Not every partnership has been straightforward. Some organisations have come expecting funding rather than genuine collaboration. Others have assumed Start Thurrock would lead engagement when the team thought they were supporting – creating confusion and trust issues when offers were made to communities before partner availability was confirmed. Some have deviated from agreed plans at the last minute. And some have simply not understood who Start Thurrock are.

Non-arts partners such as libraries, housing officers and community organisations have often been easier to work with, bringing different assumptions and working styles.

Reputational risk is a real consideration too – when partners do not deliver as agreed, it is Start Thurrock's name that stays with

the community. Where the conditions for a good partnership have been in place – shared understanding, clear expectations, honest communication from the start – the results have been strong. Where they have not, the relationship has been resource-intensive, and the outcomes have fallen short.

What has changed across the phase is **Start Thurrock's confidence in naming this and acting on it. Regular communication and planning ahead** – as the Big Lunches model demonstrates – makes a tangible difference to how well partnerships deliver. Going into the next phase, Start Thurrock is keen to be more deliberate about all of this, including in **exploring its own 'On Your Marks, Get Set, Go!' framework to manage a growing number of relationships without losing the quality and intentionality** that has made partnerships work well so far.

3.4. Impacts & Insights

Here we present the analysis of data from the Culture Counts platform. Audience members, peers and organisers rate events on how much they agree with a series of 'dimensions'. We have split the analysis into two areas:

Events: Events where audiences come along, or people participate in a workshop are rated on the following dimensions:

- Cultural Contribution: It provides an important addition to the cultural life of the area
- Distinctiveness: It was different from things I've experienced before
- Enthusiasm: I would come to something like this again

- Local Impact: It's important that it's happening here
- Relevance: It had something to say about modern society
- Rigour: It was well thought through and put together

Co-creation: Activities that involve decision making or co-created work are rated on the following dimensions:

- Experimenting: I expect that they will feel comfortable trying new things
- Intensity: I expect they will feel deeply involved in the process
- Intention: I expect they will feel able to shape the intention of the project
- Motivation: I expect they will feel motivated to do more creative things in the future
- Voice: I expect they will feel their ideas are taken seriously

Audience reaction and organiser intention

First, we explore how audience scores compare with those of the organisers and peers. When looking at events with audiences and participants, we see that on average the audiences rate events higher than organisers across the phase, showing that **audiences really value the high-quality experiences they are having**. Particularly, audiences (public) find the events far more distinct than organisers themselves predict (19% higher) and also far more relevant (17% higher than organisers).

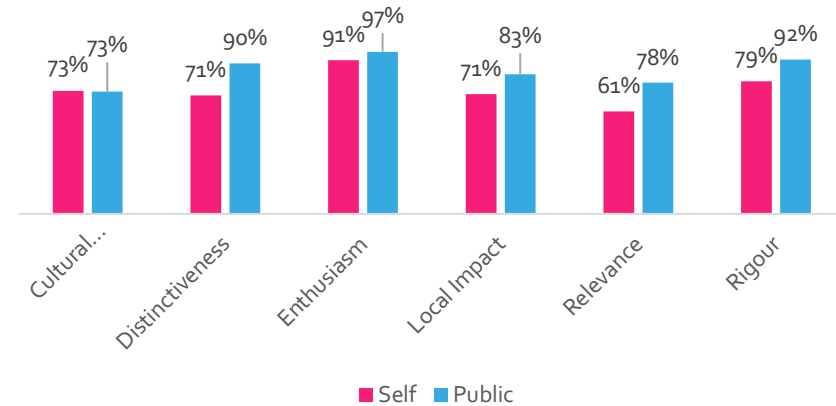


Figure 10: Comparing audience and organiser scores for event dimensions. Base = 186 total I&I responses

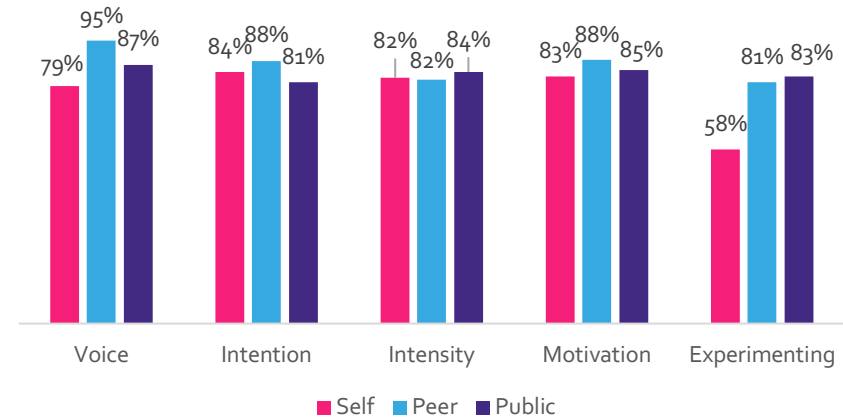


Figure 11: Comparing participant, peer and organiser scores for co-creation dimensions. Base = 186 total I&I response

Likewise, when we look at the ratings for the co-created and decision-making activities, we see high scores, in particular for voice and feeling like their ideas were taken seriously. Again, participants tend to rate dimensions higher than organisers, although scores are not as different as for the audience events, perhaps showing **that those involved in the co-creation are closer to the programme and therefore have a better understanding of it**. Peers are also likely to score events highly, showing that Start Thurrock are valued within the cultural sector.

Audience reactions over time

Here we compare just the audience reactions to the events and co-created activities to see how these have changed over the course of the phase.

Firstly, we compare scores for audience events across the phase (Figure 12). The data here shows that almost every single dimension has increased or maintained the score between 23-24 and 25-26.

The only exception is distinctiveness, which explores how different the event is from other things people have experienced. This would make sense due to the high proportion of returning attendees who may have experienced similar events across the phase.

Finally, we look at the scores for co-creation and decision-making activities (Figure 13). These scores are more variable than some of the other groups explored above, with scores in 23-24 tending to be highest.

However, far more data was captured in 25-26 so the previous ratings may have a higher margin of error. Despite this, **scores remain high across all dimensions, with average over 80% in**

every area, with participants finding events particularly strong for voice and motivation.

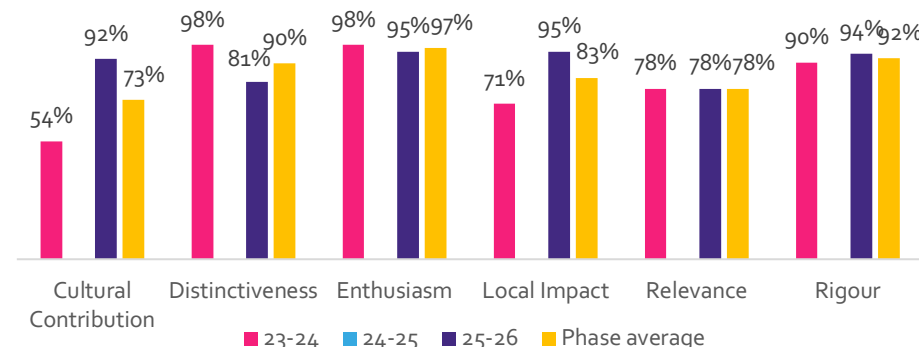


Figure 12: Comparing audience scores for event dimensions across the phase. Base = 186 total I&I responses

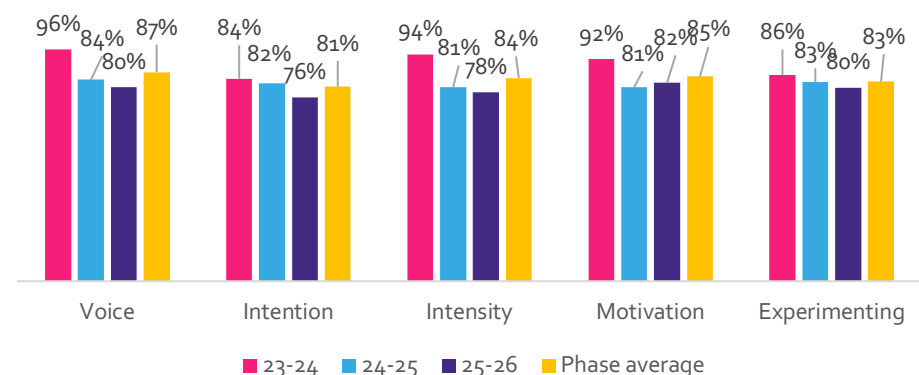


Figure 13: Comparing participant scores for co-creation and decision-making dimensions across the phase. Base = 186 total I&I responses

3.5. Challenges

3.5.1. Sustaining engagement beyond a single event

Despite diary commitments and verbal enthusiasm, **stated interest did not always translate into actual participation** – particularly when approaching established social groups whose routine was disrupted, or older participants who themselves noted a tendency to express interest without following through. Limited follow-up with newly identified musicians from the Myths of the Marshes period is a named example of this challenge.

This matters because **the aim is not attendance at one event but a genuine shift in people's relationship with culture** – and a single visit, however positive, does not achieve that on its own. The learning is that conversion from interest to sustained engagement requires personal follow-up, dedicated capacity and sufficient time – and that where those conditions aren't in place, the opportunity is lost even when the initial connection has been made.

3.5.2. Data collection

Start Thurrock has developed a **committed approach to data collection** over the phase, building a group of five community data gatherers and observers since 2024. This included one observer who remains actively involved over a year later despite their young age.

Where a staff member can go through a survey with someone directly, the conversation that follows is rich. It opens up additional questions and nuance that a self-completed survey cannot capture.

The limitation is that this is only really possible at smaller events and activities. At larger events, self-completion is the only practical option, and the volume of questions can itself limit engagement with the survey.

The **Super Fans network** has helped reduce survey fatigue. Super Fans complete their demographic information once on joining and they don't have to repeat it at every event, reducing the load while maintaining data quality.

Over time, **the data has reached a point of saturation** – the same answers are coming back. This is not a failure but a signal. It **reflects the programme's consistency and quality and has created a curiosity within the team about going deeper**. The current data tells Start Thurrock that people enjoyed events and felt welcomed, but not what changed for them as a result.

For the **next phase, two additional approaches** are being explored. The first is an **Evaluation Reference Group** – not involved in the data gathering itself, but in being part of the analysis process, bringing community voice and ownership into how the impact is narrated.

The second is **building the community data collectors further**, with additional support and guidance and giving observers specific focused questions per event theme. Together these represent a **meaningful shift towards an evaluation model that can speak to impact as well as reach** – one that is proportionate to a programme that is consistently achieving the highest possible scores on the measures it has used to date, and now needs new tools to capture what it is actually changing.

4. What worked and how?

Here we explore what has worked across the phase and how – the ingredients that have made Start Thurrock's model successful, the ways in which that model is multiplying its impact beyond the programme itself and the challenges that remain.

They are definitely a driving force. They're community-based – they think about what's happening on the ground and how they can help and support.

Nicky Smith, Active Essex

This section also answers Arts Council England's Research Question 3:

What else are we learning that facilitates better public engagement in creativity and culture?

ACE RQ3

We find that:

- The **tried and trusted approach is working** – and the good process that has been built over four years is now reaping real rewards. Things that were hard at the start are now running smoothly, **freeing the team to focus on what matters most**.
- Start Thurrock is **leaving the cultural landscape of Thurrock changed** – not just through what it has delivered, but through

the **confidence it has built in cultural leaders, the ambition it has grown in local people, and the ways of working it has modelled for others**.

- **The quality of the process has been as important as the quality of the output** throughout the phase – and the two have consistently reinforced each other.
- **Partnership working** has been central to everything – and Start Thurrock has developed a **clearer, more deliberate approach** to it across the phase, with **multiplying impacts** that are **now visible beyond Thurrock**.
- Start Thurrock is now **embedded at both grassroots and strategic level** – operating across the full spectrum simultaneously, and **increasingly present in conversations and decisions** that shape the wider cultural, health and community landscape of Thurrock.
- The **challenges that remain are largely the challenges of success** – managing a **growing reputation**, stretching limited **capacity**, and **asking harder questions** about depth and impact than the current tools can yet answer.

It's repeated consistency and craftsmanship. Craftsmanship of facilitation, and a ruthless strategic commitment to mutuality – to making stuff better without being someone else's idea of better.

That's quite special. It shouldn't be. I'm really glad Start Thurrock are working hard to make it more of a normal.

Laura Tremain, artist

We've done very similar partnerships in other areas where we've been promised a lot and that hasn't come. We were slightly braced for that. And then we were just consistently, really impressed.

Luke Hallgarten, The Revel Puck Circus

4.1. What works: The Start Thurrock ingredients

The ingredients from Year 3 remain as relevant as ever – however in Year 4 we have added two more:

Strategic advocacy is new as a named ingredient in Year 4, though it has been building throughout the phase. **It reflects Start Thurrock's growing maturity and credibility** – the organisation is no longer just delivering arts, it is **actively shifting whether arts are valued at a systemic level**. Putting arts on other people's agendas, being in the room when decisions are made, and making the case that culture should be embedded rather than added on –

this is a distinct and important part of what Start Thurrock now does.

Thought leadership and ecosystem building sits alongside strategic advocacy. Start Thurrock is now **described by partners and evaluators as a thought leader and quality assurance agent for the wider cultural ecosystem of Thurrock** – a role that has emerged from four years of consistent, values-led practice and is now being recognised and drawn on by others.

Values led – honesty and transparency as active practices have been present throughout the phase but have become more prominent and more deliberate in Year 4. Being values led is the ingredient that means Start Thurrock does not take a win if the process was not right – it **holds itself to account** publicly, names what has not worked as readily as what has and **treats its own learning as something to share** rather than manage. It is what makes the permission to fail genuine rather than performative.

Strength-based, asset-based approach – going with the energy of people who want to be involved rather than expending resource trying to persuade those who don't – has sharpened as a principle in Year 4. It is visible in how the Green Light programme is now run, in how hyperlocal engagement is being approached, and in the thinking behind the three-model test for the next phase.

Community as advocates has emerged as a new ingredient that did not exist at the start of the phase. **Community members have become part of the communication and outreach infrastructure through their own choice** – not because Start Thurrock asked them to, but because the quality of their experience made them want to.

What works – the ingredients



The key ingredients that guide how Start Thurrock works and its success



Valuing communities' local knowledge

Start Thurrock's deep local knowledge, lived experience, and energetic leadership drive meaningful, community-focused projects that truly respond to local needs.



Joining the dots & connecting others

Acting as a collaborative connector to unite people, projects and funding. Start Thurrock is now recognised as a thought leader and quality assurance agent for the wider cultural ecosystem – a role that has emerged from four years of consistent, values-led practice.



Community-led decision making

The refined community-led decision-making process empowers local people to shape what is delivered, fostering ownership, trust and pride in their communities.



Supporting creatives in a Start Thurrock way

Developing community expertise by supporting local creatives, influencing partners through collaboration and strategically shaping Thurrock's overall plan.



Strategic advocacy

Actively putting arts and culture on other people's agendas, shifting it from a peripheral concern to an embedded part of how Thurrock thinks.



Planning and reflecting

Start Thurrock values long-term change, embedding planning, reflection and learning into their action learning process.



Taking risks and trying new things

Elevating projects by combining local knowledge with a willingness to take risks, fostering ambition and learning while ensuring quality and responsiveness



Genuinely critiquing themselves

Reflecting and critiquing decisions to ensure they are inclusive, appropriate and rooted in hyperlocal voices – and being honest enough not to take a win if the process was not right, treating transparency as an active practice rather than an afterthought.



Shifting the delivery model

Managing the team changes has allowed Start Thurrock's delivery model to be refined, with consistent community presence being fundamental.



Doing what they say

Consistently demonstrating their values and principles through their work and reliability.



Community advocates (Super Fans)

Become part of Start Thurrock's outreach and communication infrastructure through their own choices, spreading the programme through their own networks in ways the team alone could not reach.

Start Thurrock has got a maturity to it that maybe those other NPOs are still trying to grow. It's reached a different level – this idea of what it could do next and how it has influence.

You can go to Start Thurrock and ask them about a community they're working in, and you'll be able to get really good information...they know who they are and what they do.

Consortium member

Everything they said they were going to do, they did – which isn't always the case with partners, to be honest with you. The success of the project definitely wouldn't have been possible without them.

Luke Hallgarten, The Revel Puck Circus

4.2. Key learning: Designing and delivering the work

4.2.1. The importance of getting the team structure right

Start Thurrock has tried different team configurations over four years – being open about what was and wasn't working, and making informed decisions about what to change rather than persisting with something that wasn't serving the project.

The result is a team structure that now works well: **roles are clear, processes are embedded, and new team members know what to do and how to do things** without everything having to be built from scratch.

Crucially, it has freed the **Creative Director to step back from day-to-day** operational pressure and do the creative director role properly – including the **external research, sector engagement and strategic thinking** that feeds directly into the quality of the programme. That is not a small thing and is already reaping rewards in terms of spreading Start Thurrock's good practice into delivery across the district.

4.2.2. The importance of getting the right artist

Artist-led projects with community roots work best. Four years of consistent evidence point to the same conclusion: **projects that start from what communities want, and that respond to place, land well.**

This is not a new finding, but its consistency across the phase makes it a firm phase-level learning. The CPP model works because it starts with communities. Projects that bypass that starting point do not benefit from what makes the model strong.

Avoid co-creation quality and process quality diverging. An excellent process of engagement does not automatically produce excellent art as the outcome – and Year 4 produced an honest example of this. Reviewing delivery, Start Thurrock's Creative Director found that the co-creation elements of the Revel Puck programme with young people did not meet Start Thurrock's quality standard.

The R&D process had worked but the co-creation delivery had not fully delivered on its ambition. The Director openly reflected on and shared this, discussing issues and how to avoid them in future. The learning is twofold: **assumed experience does not always reflect readiness**, and earlier **research into a partner's capacity to deliver** – not just their artistic quality – is needed before committing to a co-creation model.

This kind of honest self-assessment, made openly within the team's own reflection sessions, is what enables Start Thurrock to develop its practice rather than simply repeat it.

4.2.3. The importance of the hyperlocal

Working in a hyperlocal way has been central to Start Thurrock's model from the beginning – and its importance is only going to grow. People know who Start Thurrock are, and significant trust has been built through the team doing what they say they are going to.

Over the next few years, as devolution and local government reorganisation reshape Thurrock, the Borough as an administrative unit will become less of an organising entity in local people's minds. But their (hyperlocal) communities will remain important or even grow in importance. As one Consortium member put it: "Thurrock is a construct. Nobody actually lives in Thurrock as such. You've got to think hyperlocal."

The communities that Start Thurrock work with identify with their town, their estate, their street – not with a borough boundary. A programme that understands this, and that has spent four years building presence and trust at that level, is well placed for whatever the reorganisation brings. The hyperlocal foundations Start Thurrock has laid are not just good practice – they are **the right infrastructure for what comes next**.

4.2.4. The importance of balancing established areas with new ones

As Start Thurrock's **reputation has grown**, its **visibility has become uneven** – well established in some areas and contexts, less consistent in others. Balancing sustained presence in places like South Ockenden and Purfleet, where relationships and audiences have been built over time, alongside the need to respond to emerging opportunities and new communities elsewhere is a capacity challenge. **Keeping momentum going in established areas while extending into new ones** requires more resource than a small team can always provide – and risks some communities experiencing Start Thurrock as less present just as others are discovering it for the first time.

For more details, see *Appendix 3 – Full analysis report* and Case study 1: Community decision making (2024) in *Phase 1 Evaluation Case Studies*.

4.2.5. The value of being embedded at grassroots and strategic level

What makes Start Thurrock distinctive – and what partners consistently notice – is the **ability to operate at both ends of the spectrum** at the same time. Sitting with someone in a bingo club in Aveley and being in the room when Pride of Place funding is discussed are not separate activities for different teams – they are both part of how Start Thurrock works. Most organisations do one or the other.

Start Thurrock does both, and the team structure developed over four years now makes that sustainable: the Creative Director has space for external research, strategic relationships and sector engagement, while the Engagement Producer does the sustained, patient, on-the-ground work that makes the grassroots offer real.

Partners have noticed. Essex Cultural Diversity Project (ECDP) have described Start Thurrock as simultaneously grassroots-led and strategic – and named that combination as rare. Nicky at Active Essex described how working alongside Start Thurrock has changed how her own organisation thinks and works. A Consortium member noted that community voice is "utterly embedded" in every decision Creative Director, Katie makes. That is what grassroots and strategic working well together actually looks like. It isn't a compromise between the two, but each making the other stronger.

Underpinning all of this is something that predates the programme itself. **Katie and Roxie (Executive Director) came with existing relationships, networks and trust already built in Thurrock.** That foundation – the credibility, the connections, the deep knowledge of place – is not something four years of CPP funding alone could have created. It is a significant input into what has enabled Start Thurrock to move as far and as fast as it has.

Building on this, **Chadwell in Action**, a group instigated by Thurrock Council to bring groups operating in the area together, was highlighted as a standout example of community enablement – a convening model where change happened without new funding. People who would not typically be in that space turned up and everyone worked on something together.

This is a model **of bringing a community together around a shared agenda** that does not depend on Start Thurrock being the lead or the funder, but on Start Thurrock having done enough groundwork that the community has the confidence and the connections to act. Having sustained presence in Chadwell has made this possible, and the model is replicable so could be established in other areas.

When we went for the [start of Phase 1] interview at the Arts Council, we told them this is what would happen. They were very polite and lovely, but there was a bit of cynicism – are you really going to get the community to make these decisions?

We were all going, ‘Absolutely, because that's how it works in Thurrock.’ And now that's happening – it feels like a proof of concept.

Scott Sullivan, Chair, Start Thurrock Core Consortium

4.3. Key learning: Sharing the model, spreading the impacts

Start Thurrock is having a huge impact through direct delivery, and particularly in **supporting other organisations, grassroots and community groups, and individuals to develop their work.**

However, there is an even greater potential value arising from the work of Start Thurrock in terms of its **impact on the arts and wider ecosystem of Thurrock.**

Through sharing their ‘ingredients’ for truly community-led approaches and sharing the value of arts as a way of linking communities, Start Thurrock is **influencing a range of partners**, for example other NPOs and cross-sector partners across the district to shift their practice, including, for example, Kinetika and Teatro Vivo.

This has come about over time through modelling the practice and commitment but is also arising from the greater visibility Start Thurrock now has after a few years of successful programming.

When I'm in meetings where Start Thurrock has been described, it's very much [as] an established part of the landscape.

Scott Sullivan, Chair, Start Thurrock Core Consortium

4.3.1. Change of perception and value of Start Thurrock

Start Thurrock **have had the time to prove themselves** both to the communities and partners. The embedded way that they work (as above) has proven to others over the course of two years exactly who the team are, what they stand for and what they bring. This has **enabled partners to understand and narrate Start Thurrock in a more effective way.**

For example, Thurrock Council sees Start Thurrock as central in shifting how culture is integrated across the district.

What we want to be able to do is work collaboratively and in co-creation, co-design, and Start Thurrock is really instrumental in doing that... they're already co-creating [and] co-designing directly with residents but also bringing in those artists. So they're a really crucial part of how we as an enabling Council are being able to deliver culture across Thurrock.

Lisa Ricketts, Thurrock Council (Economic Development) and Core Consortium Member

And for Thurrock CVS, Start Thurrock is core to their aims in supporting community-led decision making through Thurrock Stronger Together – and this is again because of a recognition of how Start Thurrock works:

Does Start [Thurrock] embody Asset Based Community Development? Yes absolutely. It's phenomenal.

Mark Tebbs, CEO Thurrock CVS

People trust and respect Start Thurrock. This has grown from **Start Thurrock being role models** and living and breathing their values and **doing what they say they are going to do**.

People are coming to them to ask them to partner, and they are being invited to be strategic partners. But some of this comes simply from enhanced visibility around the district:

There's been a lot of work around the visibility of Start Thurrock... compared to where we were 12 months ago in terms of brand, [there's been a huge increase in]...visibility. The newsletters are going out...the bus [has] been going around the Borough, that sort of thing....the branding and the marketing is really high quality, and it is very much presented as the voice of the people.

Scott Sullivan, Chair, Start Thurrock Core Consortium

This year has been a real big moment for them...I see things going out on their social media...every single week or month...There's a lot of stuff they're doing and people, [when] you talk about Start Thurrock, they don't go 'Oh, what's that?'...They know [who it is].

Lisa Ricketts, Thurrock Council (Economic Development) and Core Consortium Member

This visibility and respect led to **Start Thurrock playing an influential role** in the development of the action plan for the implementation of Thurrock's **new Cultural Strategy in 2026**.

4.3.2. Shifting partner behaviour

As a result of role modelling their values and practices over the course of the two years, Start Thurrock are more confident; the team know what they are doing and have got a plan. This is having a **ripple effect** where other people are being influenced to do it too.

Partners **see the benefit and impact of explicitly stopping and reflecting, considering how the community is responding** to activity and **adapting accordingly**. As a result, the Consortium members feel they more deliberately and thoughtfully take time to pause and consider the work. They have also noticed others doing this – particularly time-poor arts organisations who have not felt able to do this in the past. These too are now taking the time to pause, enabling them to identify learning and be more intentional with their next delivery.

Other orgs are doing critiques; they take the time to stop and reflect about what is working...and have more time for community voice. They are not rushing into things. Thurrock Council has also shifted behaviour as a result of the Start Thurrock model.

In approaching the redevelopment of Coalhouse Fort, [Thurrock Council] reflected that a typical ‘council-led’ approach would be to commission feasibility studies for the whole process, then spend years looking for funding for it all. In this case, they have instead broken the process down into fundable stages, allowing work to start relatively fast for a major capital project.

Scott Sullivan, Chair, Start Thurrock Core Consortium

Another way that Start Thurrock has shifted behaviour is through **supporting partners to stretch their ambition**, in terms of both scale and reach into the arts. For example, the Tilbury on the Thames Trust has a significant NLHF funded capital development plan which has been long prepared, but as a result of them holding the CPP lead, the Trust has now encouraged directors of the redevelopment to see how culture can – and indeed needs to be – a major element of this project.

As a result, **new artist studios and artist development opportunities are coming into Tilbury** which just wouldn’t have happened without their involvement with Start Thurrock. Furthermore, all the community and artist engagement within the development plan are influenced by and building on the Start Thurrock community-led approach.

There are still some partners who are yet to engage in this process but, with the Start Thurrock lens across time, this will happen.

Focussing on Year 4, this impact has further spread and **become more visible, particularly beyond the arts sector**. For example,

through working alongside each other, both Active Essex and Start Thurrock itself have learnt new approaches to engagement, and come to recognise the value that culture can bring to delivering their own outcomes:

They ensure they know the place they’re working in. They spend a lot of time getting out and about, tapping into cross-boundaries where they would normally work. They’re looking at the wider picture.

Nicky Smith, Active Essex

Arts and sport work so closely together... if you use the word arts or theatre or enrichment or music, it’s just a different way of approaching it — more appealing, friendly, relaxed, less energetic. It’s helped me with the language I use around physical literacy. It opens doors to people who don’t like the idea of physical activity.

Nicky Smith, Active Essex

Essex Cultural Diversity Project (ECDP) and Start Thurrock co-commissioned an artist, through an open call, for Coalhouse Fort. ECDP noted that the **most transferable learning from this commission was not the specific content but the approach** of letting the heritage of a site generate the creative framework rather than arriving with a concept already formed. This is a principle that ECDP is actively looking to use in a planned future project.

The influence of Start Thurrock's approach is visible within the Consortium itself. The Royal Ballet and Opera's Thurrock Trailblazer schools programme had settled into a familiar cycle post-Covid, with consultation channels that had quietly stopped. Being part of the Consortium prompted a conscious change: a steering group of headteachers and a programme panel of middle leaders were brought in to shape the direction of the programme, shifting responsibility to them as producers.

Start Thurrock does not need to be in the room for its influence to be felt. That is the measure of a model that is genuinely working.

4.3.3. Making strategic social impact partnerships to expand impact

Social value and creative health have been present in Start Thurrock's work throughout the phase – visible in outcomes, mentioned in conversations – but Year 4 is the first year in which these factors have appeared as **active strategic questions** that the organisation is genuinely pursuing. That shift has been made possible partly by the current team structure: with the Creative Director now able to attend more sector meetings and build strategic relationships, **Start Thurrock can now show up consistently in conversations where arts and culture has historically been absent or peripheral.**

The results are already visible. Active Essex and Start Thurrock now attend the same meetings, recognise the overlap in their work more explicitly than before, and are exploring concrete joint activity – including a Healthy Streets project combining active travel and a Start Thurrock art trail.

The relationship has also opened up deeper conversations about how arts can be used to explore mental health. Katie invited Nicky to a dance piece about mental health, and as Nicky described it: "It taught me... how to use those different types of arts to explore mental health and use it as expression and through physical activity. I shared it with my wider team and our sport and youth mental health team." This evidences how one conversation is producing a ripple effect across an entire organisation's practice.

This is what **getting creative health on the agenda properly** looks like – not a single project or a funding bid, but sustained presence, shared learning and the gradual building of a shared agenda.

You can't just do it on your own. I know that's not a natural place for creatives, but that's where they've got to be in Thurrock right now.

Essex Cultural Diversity Project

4.3.4. Creating the conditions for inclusion

Katie's presence in meetings across Thurrock on a range of social projects means there is an opportunity for personal intervention at an early stage to **suggest arts and culture might be included**; for example, in Pride of Place funding.

Residents and decision-makers do not instinctively name arts and culture when asked what matters to them, even when the evidence of its value is clear. That gap **requires consistent, ongoing advocacy.**

Start Thurrock's responsibility is not to wait to be included but to **create the conditions for inclusion** – by being in the room, making

connections visible, and building partnerships that bring arts and culture into conversations.

The **impact on health and wellbeing is already happening**. For example:

- Young men from Grays reflecting on mental health
- A Community Researcher member saying the role gave her renewed purpose
- Coalhouse Fort producing wellbeing outcomes that were never project intentions.

Start Thurrock's role is not to become a health organisation. It is to make arts and culture a visible, standard part of how Thurrock thinks about its communities, and to keep making that case until it no longer needs to be made. The next phase offers the opportunity to make that presence count even more.

Inclusion also runs through how Start Thurrock works. It is not a separate thing the team does, it is just how they operate. Residents, artists and partners notice and value this and shows that inclusion is coming through as a community voice as well as a team value.

4.3.5. A springboard for progression beyond the programme

Start Thurrock has **become a springboard** – and what it has built across the phase is beginning to pay forward, with people and organisations taking what they have gained and using it to **create opportunities that go well beyond the programme itself**. This

further supports the cultural ecosystem of Thurrock, extending the impact of the programme.

Supporting the **progression of individuals and groups** has emerged as one of the things Start Thurrock does particularly well – and where the impact multiplies. Working out what works in partnerships has opened up further opportunities that neither Start Thurrock nor its partners could have created alone.

Together, these opportunities are **bringing money, capacity and credibility into Thurrock** that would not otherwise be there – a **multiplying impact** that stretches well beyond what the CPP funding alone could achieve.

People and organisations mentioned in previous evaluations have taken up new opportunities thanks to the help they have received from Start Thurrock. Here are examples from those featured in our 2024/25 Evaluation case studies:

- Teatro Vivo who created *The Mystery of the Missing Market*, having shared what they achieved with Start Thurrock, are now replicating that co-creation model in Kent, working with the Medway CPP, Ideas Test.
- A musician from Purfleet was part of the Teatro Vivo show. Afterwards they reached out to Start Thurrock and found out about Green Light, applied as an artist and ran a session. Another National Portfolio Organisation attended that session and praised the work publicly in a meeting.
- Thurrock LGBTQ+ Community Network, an example of growing community leaders in 2024/25, went on to independently secure £250,000 from the National Lottery

Community Fund, allowing them to expand their work in the area.

4.4. Key learning: Developing strong supportive governance

4.4.1. Sustainable and coordinated governance

As for many CPPs, governance and getting the model of governance right has been a challenge over the phase.

The Consortium have developed extensively over the phase. They were extremely connected (internally and externally) and supportive of the leads, from the start. During this time, they have taken the chance and challenge offered by the lead organisation reconstituting itself to reflect on their structure and approach, and moved to a model with an independent chair.

Overwhelming pride and commitment and drive...goes into [this] area from all parties around the table.

Kelly Matthews, Consortium member

There were two particularly important development points in the phase which illustrate the challenges and shifts. The first was the proposed change in structure of the lead organisation, the Tilbury on Thames Trust (needed so that they could receive significant capital funding) which Arts Council England flagged as raising some concerns regarding potential for risk of conflict of interest.

They noted that the Consortium hadn't challenged this enough, looking at implications for the CPP itself within the new model.

The Consortium held an 'in camera' discussion without the Trust present to review and discuss issues, and members felt this was a really useful process which challenged them on their roles as Consortium members. The conclusion was to fully agree the Trust's plans, but they all felt this was a fully thought through decision and that the process acted as a model for the future.

I think we learnt a lot probably from [the Arts Council England challenge on governance and] our risk being increased. Part of that for me was about possible overfamiliarity amongst ourselves, because we're all confident with each other and just [say] 'Yeah, of course, that'll be fine. Change your legal status. It's all cool and dandy.'

And then when we've stopped and reflected, it was like, 'Oh, actually, that's a much bigger decision than we really thought about at the time.' But we got through that; no one fell out. It was all good stuff. So I think that was a very positive thing.

Neil Woodbridge, Consortium member

The very open nature of this discussion, and the request for and valuing of feedback from the evaluation points to this Consortium group being an excellent space for the governance of Start Thurrock. This is backed by Arts Council England reducing the risk rating.

The second area of development has been the discussion over appointing an independent chair. An independent chair was recommended by evaluators in Year 2; it remained pending in Year 3, but in Year 4 concrete steps were taken although nobody applied because the role was voluntary. During an evaluation review in early 2026 several significant steps were taken to make the governance more effective: the existing Chair's casting vote was removed; consensus-based decision making was adopted, and an **Interim Chair was appointed** from within the Consortium (from outside the lead organisation).

The decision was made **to pay for an independent chair** which is likely to significantly increase the likelihood of recruiting someone with the right skills and distance to do the role properly.

All Consortium members fully back, embrace and seem to both understand and live the Start Thurrock principles, noting ways they thread through their own organisations, and/or encourage more input from Start Thurrock into activities they coordinate.

On behalf of the [lead organisation's] board, we feel really proud of what we've achieved as a Trust and I think that it would be amazing if we could share that story...as an example of how [a CPP] can be leveraged into delivering wider impact on place [through our £4.5M NLHF grant success].

Scott Sullivan, Chair, Start Thurrock Core Consortium
and Tilbury on the Thames Trust Director

Looking forward to the new phase of work, the Consortium remains strong, with extremely committed members holding

extensive local knowledge. The question of whether members have enough distance from each other to provide genuinely challenging support – rather than a tendency to affirm – is one Arts Council England has raised, and Start Thurrock takes seriously. The new independent chair should bring a useful element of distance if they are appointed from outside Thurrock, and there is potential to bring in new Consortium members who could add contacts in some of the wider areas of work, such as regeneration or health.

For existing and new members, there is **the opportunity for more emphasis on consistently championing Start Thurrock's work within their own organisations, or to use members' own day-to-day networks to advocate for the programme.**

Thurrock's cultural sector is a small, well-connected community, and that closeness has real strengths alongside its challenges.

The cultural strategy process, now actively underway with a large open session to gather views from across the sector, is a significant development in this context – and one Start Thurrock is actively contributing to.

4.5. Addressing challenges across the phase

Through application of an action research approach, Start Thurrock have actively worked to overcome, and ambitiously address, all the challenges that have arisen.

Over the phase, the nature of the challenges Start Thurrock has faced have themselves changed – and that shift is worth noting.

In the early years, the challenges were largely about establishing and proving the model:

- Building trust with communities who were sceptical
- Getting the commissioning process right
- Developing the team, and
- Demonstrating that a genuinely community-led approach was possible in Thurrock.

These were real and significant challenges, but they were also the expected challenges of a programme finding its feet.

Next, we list some of the challenges which Start Thurrock has met, worked on and adapted around over the phase.

4.5.1. Completing the community commissioning journey

Beginning in Year 3, Core Panel members reviewed and reflected on commissioned projects after delivery – not just before.

The benefits of ‘closing the loop’ between community input and communities seeing the results of that input are being felt now.

Members can see what their voice produced and recognise themselves in the outcomes. This increases future confidence in the programming, and this will continue to multiply up.

It is really valuable to keep communication going throughout the hyperlocal process. If things are delayed, people need to know – and they need to know why.

Staying in touch matters although is not always easy to do. The team has been intentional with this approach, and it opens up opportunities to think about other ways to close the loop with people.

4.5.2. Delivery partnership models

Start Thurrock is managing a growing number of partnerships – and as its reputation has grown, so has the **demand on its time and attention from organisations that want to work with it.**

The learning across the phase about what makes partnerships function well – shared understanding, clear expectations, early honest conversations – is directly relevant here.

As the number of relationships grows, being more deliberate and selective about where energy goes becomes more important, not less. Start Thurrock is keen to go into the **next phase with a clearer framework for how it categorises and manages partnerships**, so that the quality and intentionality that has made them work well so far is not lost as the volume increases.

4.5.3. Managing capacity

Like many arts organisations, capacity is an ongoing challenge – and Start Thurrock is no different. **As the profile and influence of the team grows, so do the demands** – more strategic conversations, more partnership management, more advocacy, alongside the core delivery work.

Importantly, Start Thurrock’s model enables the team to draw on freelancers to flex and meet demand where needed. There is a real risk that the demand outpaces what a team of this size can sustain without it affecting quality, wellbeing or both.

Getting the balance right between saying ‘yes’ to opportunities and protecting the capacity to do things well is one of the most important operational challenges going into the next phase.

Capacity is something that needs to be factored into conversations about growth. This is **an area where the Consortium has a role to play in oversight** – helping make sure growth ambitions are matched by the resource and support needed to deliver them well.

4.5.4. The gap between being known and being understood

Start Thurrock is now well known in Thurrock – and increasingly beyond it. But **being known and being understood are not the same thing**.

Some partners assume Start Thurrock is a funding organisation and approach it accordingly. Others see it as a delivery organisation and want it to provide activities rather than work in genuine partnership. Some Consortium members understand the model deeply – others are still developing their grasp of what Start Thurrock actually is and what it needs from the relationships around it.

Managing this gap – being clear about what Start Thurrock does, how it works, and what genuine collaboration with it requires – takes consistent time and energy. It is also a challenge that grows as the programme becomes more visible. The more people have heard of Start Thurrock, the more assumptions they bring to the relationship.

Going into the next phase, developing a clear and updated narrative about what Start Thurrock is and what it offers – a refreshed elevator pitch that reflects where the programme has got to and its impact to date – is one of the practical things that would help address this directly.

4.5.5. Partnering with projects with capital elements

Partnering with projects – like the Purfleet-on-Thames Community Pantry – with capital elements has proven a challenge. This is when Start Thurrock works alongside organisations who are delivering capital elements to enhance and deliver in the spaces being created.

These arose with greater frequency in Year 4 as the programme became more ambitious and so projects included these elements. In the next phase, they will occur more often again as ambition grows further.

These can create particular challenges that are fundamentally different from programme delivery. Work cannot be announced or activated until permissions are in place. This can compress delivery time significantly and create pressure on a team that is already stretched.

The learning is practical but important. **Written agreements, permissions and sign offs need to be confirmed before public commitments are made.** Getting this wrong does not just create logistical problems – it creates reputational risk in communities where expectations have already been raised.

4.5.6. The challenges that come with success

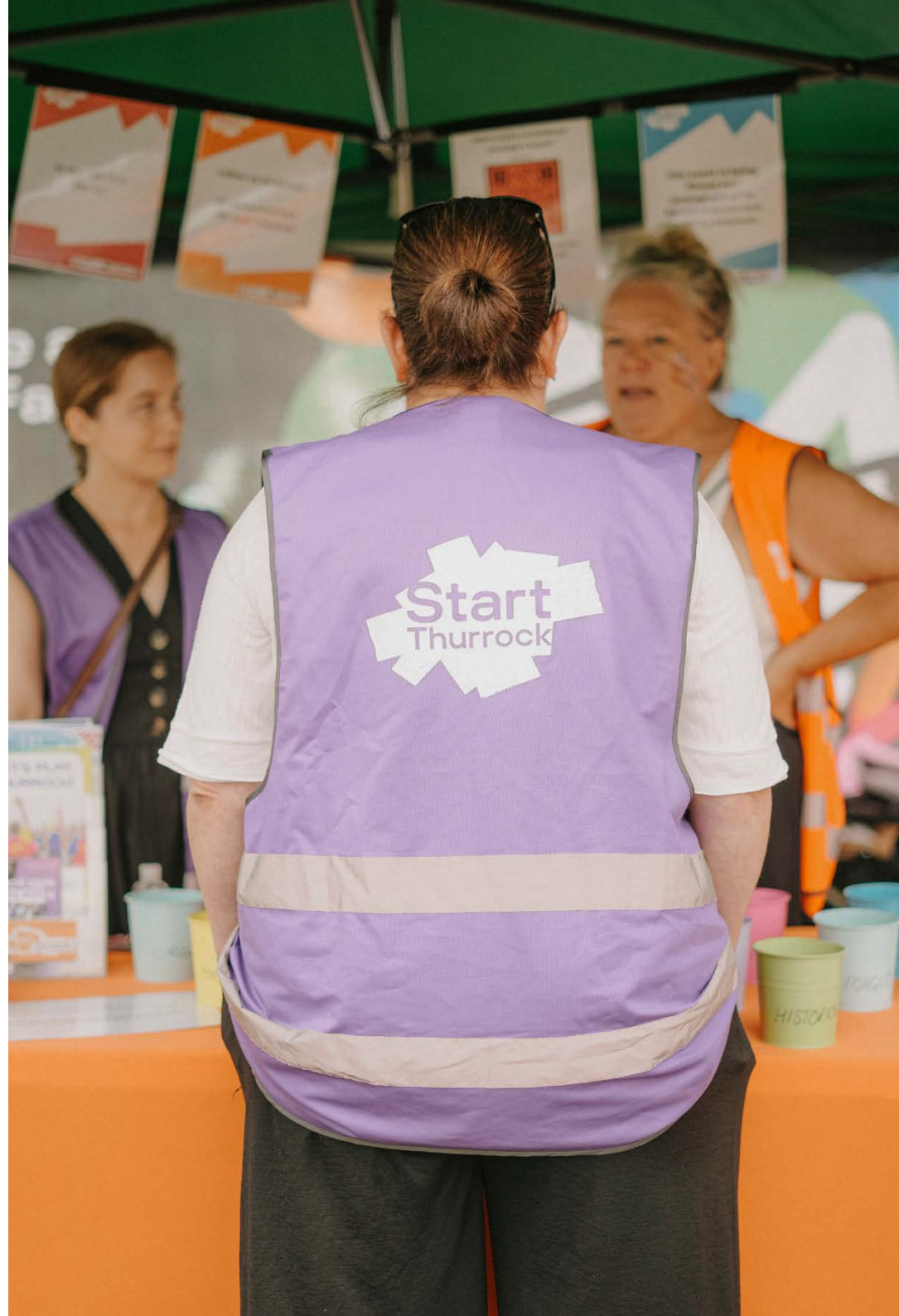
Despite some remaining areas which are being worked on, by the end of Year 4, those challenges have largely been met.

The model works, the trust is there, the team is settled, and the evidence is strong. **The challenges now are different in kind – they are the challenges that come with success.**

- Managing the expectations of partners and stakeholders who want more than Start Thurrock has capacity to give.
- Navigating the consequences of a growing reputation in a place where the cultural ecosystem is small and interconnected.
- Asking harder questions about depth and impact rather than reach and access.
- Holding the balance between strategic influence and grassroots presence as both become more demanding.
- And, finding ways to sustain the energy and wellbeing of a small team that has achieved a significant amount in a short time and is now being asked to do more.

These are good problems to have – but they are real ones, and they will shape what the next phase needs to look like.

The transition from a programme proving itself into an organisation with an established role and growing influence requires different thinking, different structures and different kinds of support. Start Thurrock is well placed to make that transition – but it will need to be deliberate about it.



5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

Start Thurrock set out to prove a concept – that communities in Thurrock could be put in the driving seat of cultural decision making, that excellent art and excellent engagement could be delivered together, and that a programme could learn and improve continuously over time.

Four years on, the evidence is that it has done all three – and more. Start Thurrock has **reached local people**, consistently from the groups least likely to engage.

It has **produced quality work that communities have shaped, owned and taken pride in**. And it has **built a model that is honest** about what has not worked as well as what has, and that **others are now looking to and learning from**.

Strong values set early and consistently lived, combined with the right team, have produced a CPP that is **strategically well-connected**, producing quality work, and well **ahead of where comparable programmes are** at the same point in their journey.

The complementary skill set and consistency in approach of the Creative Director and Executive Director has been central to this. The result is a programme that is now consistently rated at the highest level across every measure the evaluation uses. That is both an achievement and a prompt: with the current measures at their ceiling.

Start Thurrock are **rising to the challenge** of the 'artificial ceiling' with two particular approaches started in Year 4 and to be extended into the new phase:

1. **'Go deeper': Into the impact on individuals and communities over time**, into the broader **social value** of what the programme produces, and into **new models of engagement** – high street activation, the Creative R&D Commission in East Tilbury and working intensively with specific existing groups – that will test what sustained, place-based presence can achieve when the foundations of trust are already in place.
2. **'Go wider': Building on the networks and attendance in strategic conversations** in Year 4, the Start Thurrock directors have reached a position where they can strategically co-develop work cross-sector, building on, for example, creative health and wellbeing and pride in place – further spreading the impact.

Thurrock's **cultural landscape has shifted** over the phase and with the **strong foundations, community trust, and increasingly strategic presence** across the Borough, Start Thurrock is **well placed for the changes ahead** – including the devolution and local government reorganisation that will reshape the landscape – and is ready to build on everything Phase 1 has made possible.

5.2. Recommendations

Programme and partnerships

Build on the foundations to go deeper and wider

Continue to extend the work to push beyond the ceiling effect, going deeper into intensive place-based engagement and the impact on individuals and communities, and going wider by building on the strategic presence and cross-sector work.

Start Thurrock is clearly achieving funder goals of reaching and engaging more people in arts and culture. It is learning and sharing learning on what works to do this, while ensuring high quality, and developing community leadership.

Phase 2 offers the opportunity for Start Thurrock to add more value for the people of Thurrock. They should continue to meet and exceed Arts Council England aims, but also look at how this approach can bring wider social value for example through developing greater community leadership – both within the arts and beyond, through increasing wellbeing and pride in place.

These outcomes are already happening through Start Thurrock's work, there is opportunity to more explicitly programme for them, and to measure and share the effectiveness of Start Thurrock's way of working in achieving them.

Further value can be gained by extending the influence of Start Thurrock on other local programmes and organisations in terms of approaches which maximise the value they can bring.

This can include approaches – such as the 'ingredients' – but also showing explicitly how Start Thurrock's work delivers on cross sector aims.

Protect the balance of strategic and programming work

Continue to resist the pressure to join every conversation and continue to be deliberate about where energy goes furthest.

Following on from the recommendations above, there is a need to continue to carefully focus where, how and when Start Thurrock acts.

Finding and keeping an appropriate focus to maximise the value of the time available to the Directors has been a real success of Phase 1. Time and support from partners is needed to map out the best ways of taking the different elements of the programme forward, particularly in balancing the importance of maintaining the extremely high quality of all work.

This is something which both Directors have the skills to do, and Consortium and partners can build on this in supporting them.

Develop an updated narrative and 'elevator pitch'

Articulate clearly what Start Thurrock is now, what it offers and what makes it distinctive.

As relatively new initiatives taking a different approach to working with communities and in arts and culture, all CPPs struggle with being able to explain exactly what they are aiming to do and how they work. As Start Thurrock now has a clear style and approach, and a wealth of examples of what their activities and outcomes

look like, it is now time to pull together a number of ways of talking about the work.

This will support both team and partners, particularly Consortium members, in advocating for Start Thurrock involvement or the use of Start Thurrock approaches. Both policy-facing and community facing versions are needed. Particularly to reach beyond the traditional arts sector.

Be more deliberate about partnerships

Use a framework to manage a growing number of relationships without losing quality or intentionality.

This recommendation is partly about practicality – particularly given we advise more partnership building – but mainly about modelling. Start Thurrock’s relationship building works well and it another potential model to share.

Having clear categories would both support internal prioritisation and decision making, and also allow for the model and approach to be mapped and written up to add to the good practice material that Start Thurrock can share.

Organisational development and governance

Plan for growth and address capacity

Set out clearly in the next phase business plan how Start Thurrock intends to grow, what capacity it needs, and how the weight of the programme is shared across the team.

Starting a three year period of relative financial stability with agreed funding and an established model allows the programme to

think about where it should be after this Phase. CPPs are designed to be around for at least 10 years, this requires thinking about how the next Phase would look, run and be funded.

Maintaining work at the current level may not be the most effective model, other CPPs have sought and gained additional funding, at times matching or exceeding their ACE funding. This is an option that Start Thurrock’s Consortium might like to consider given the needs of the area.

If this sort of growth is sought and achieved, there is need for strategic consideration of what additional areas to move into, and how to maximise the value of the strong and effective delivery team.

Prioritise independent governance

Follow through on the agreement to appoint a paid independent chair, and establish facilitated away days as a standing commitment.

Strengthen Consortium engagement

As Start Thurrock moves into a new phase, there is an opportunity for Consortium members to play an even more active role in championing the programme, supporting funding opportunities and continuing to develop governance structures.

Evaluation and evidence

Implement the Evaluation Reference Group

Focused support and guidance for community data collectors and more specific observation questions in full.

Revisit evaluation tools and data collection

Restore the participatory function of engagement boards, review what is collected in new data systems, and ensure space for open qualitative responses alongside quantitative data.

Move towards social value measurement

Begin building the evidence base at the right touchpoints, identifying settings where before-and-after tracking is feasible.

Go deeper with the Core Panel and commissions

Involve panel members in the full cycle, including reviewing and reflecting on work after delivery.



Appendices

The Appendices are available from <https://rmresearch.uk/start-thurrock-appendices/>

- **Appendix 1: Methodology** – How the evaluation was carried out and the information and feedback collected.
- **Appendix 2: Story of Change** – How the project made a difference for people and what enabled the successes to be achieved.
- **Appendix 3: Full analysis report** – A deeper, more detailed look at who the project reached and what their experience was like.
- **Appendix 4: Evaluation framework** – The plan that guided the evaluation – what to collect, from who and when to collect it.

Credits

This evaluation was produced by [RMR, embedded evaluation and strategic development specialists](#).

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Thanks

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Find out [more about Start Thurrock's work](#) on their website.

Endnotes

¹ See the Section 1, About Creative People and Places for more on this

² <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/thurrock-facts-and-statistics/location-and-place>

³ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/thurrock-facts-and-statistics/employment-and-income>

⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/Eo6000034-thurrock/indicators#economy>

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/Eo6000034-thurrock/indicators>

⁶ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/thurrock-facts-and-statistics/population>

⁷ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/thurrock-facts-and-statistics/population>

⁸ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/sites/default/files/assets/documents/hwb-strategy-2022-v01.pdf>, p6

⁹ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/sites/default/files/assets/documents/hwb-strategy-2022-v01.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/Eo6000034-thurrock/indicators#population>

¹¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/Eo6000034-thurrock/indicators#population>

¹² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/Eo6000034-thurrock/indicators#median-age>

¹³ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/thurrock-facts-and-statistics/population>

¹⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#/Eo6000034>

¹⁵ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/sites/default/files/assets/documents/hwb-strategy-2022-v01.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4n6gg1x146o>

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-64028633>

¹⁸ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/elections-and-election-results/uk-parliament-election-results>

¹⁹ Defined as **30 minutes drivetime** from Tilbury Cruise Terminal

²⁰ Defined as **90 minutes drivetime** from Tilbury Cruise Terminal

²¹ Audience Spectrum analysis from The Audience Agency. For more, see Appendix 3

²² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/Eo6000034-thurrock/indicators#connectivity>

²³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/explore-local-statistics/areas/Eo6000034-thurrock/indicators#connectivity>

²⁴ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/arts-and-culture/thurrock-plan-for-culture-home>

²⁵ For more details, see <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places-o>

²⁶ <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/ace-expands-creative-people-and-places-portfolio>

²⁷ <https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/ace-expands-creative-people-and-places-portfolio>

²⁸ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/cpp-2026-2029/cpp-projects-south-east-2026-2029>

²⁹ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/cpp-2026-2029>

³⁰ As reported by other CPPs – see <https://www.revolutionarts.com/revolution-arts-secures-funding-extension-from-arts-council-england/>

³¹ <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places-o/creative-people-and-places-projects>

³² Start Thurrock Business Plan 2023-25, p9

³³ <https://www.startthurrock.org/>

³⁴ Start Thurrock Business Plan 2023-25, p2

³⁵ Start Thurrock Business Plan 2023-25, pg

³⁶ Phase total may differ slightly from our figure due to when our data cut off point is

³⁷ <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/green-light-2026/>

³⁸ <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/thurrock-big-lunches-2025/>

³⁹ <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/the-nose-dive-assembly-birds-of-a-feather/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.revelpuckcircus.com/>

⁴¹ <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/the-myths-of-the-marshes-live-show/>

⁴² <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/kids-business/>

⁴³ <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/afro-food-fest-2025/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/orsett-show-2025/>

⁴⁵ For example, <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/haunt-coalhouse-fort-tours-of-coalhouse-fort-wednesday-29th-october/>

⁴⁶ According to the Start Thurrock website, <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/coalhouse-fort-ghost-story-competition/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.startthurrock.org/whats-on/the-big-reveal-mural-celebration/>

⁴⁸ <https://thurrockandbrentwoodmind.org.uk/>

⁴⁹ Calculated using geocoding via <https://www.doogal.co.uk/BatchGeocoding>

⁵⁰ Indices of deprivation are an official way of measuring levels of deprivation in local authorities in England. They rank local authorities using a number of metrics such as employment, income, health deprivation and crime. For more on Indices of Deprivation please see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

⁵¹ For more, please see The Audience Agency's website <https://www.theaudienceagency.org/audience-spectrum>

⁵² "What's a good Net Promoter Score?" <https://www.qualtrics.com/en-gb/articles/customer-experience/net-promoter-score/>