

CREATOR SPACES YORK

Negotiating economic
impact and social value

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Acknowledgements

Huge thanks to Chris Bailey at the Guild of Media Arts for provided essential support in making this project happen.

Special thanks go to the participants who gave up their time to complete our survey and take part in the workshops.

The speakers at our launch event were excellent and shared fascinating insights about their practice and experience:

- Phil Bixby, Constructive Individuals
- Emma Coffield, Newcastle University
- Emily Stubbs, PICA Studios
- Dawn Wood, Fabrication

We were able to commission five local artists to respond to the subject of York's creative spaces:

- Daniel Baines
- Zoe Phillips
- Alex Callaghan
- Tilly Thornborrow
- Hannah Sibai

Their work and the rest of the exhibition can be seen at: yorkcreatives.com/creative-spaces-exhibition

Funding for this project was provided by The York Policy Engine at the University of York.

About SIGN

The Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) was a unique, business-facing initiative supporting the TV, film and games industries in Yorkshire and the Humber. Between 2020 and 2023, SIGN helped to make this region the UK's centre for digital creativity, and a model of diverse and inclusive activity. SIGN connected companies, support agencies and universities through a programme of training, business development, research and evaluation. SIGN was a £6.4M project funded by Research England, the University of York and its partners. SIGN was led by a project team at the University of York who worked with Screen Yorkshire and eight other Yorkshire universities to create an extensive network of collaboration that delivered maximum impact across the region.

Report published, 2025.

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INTRODUCTION

Independent creative industries workers increasingly struggle to secure affordable professional workspaces (Salamon, 2025). In the digital era these workers face not only financial pressures but also limited access to essential training and networking opportunities. Despite claims that digitalisation renders creative work placeless, physical space and face-to-face social interaction remain critical to creative industries (Evans, 2009). Research indicates that creative workers in areas like Yorkshire often encounter significant barriers to developing their professional skills and networks within their region (Salamon, 2025). In response, scholars and policymakers have called for establishing regional public creator hubs—or “neighbourhood-based Creator Spaces” (Florida, 2022, p. 28). Such spaces would offer accessible and community-focused environments for professional development.

Here, the term creative worker refers to a broad range of occupations, including artists, authors, writers, translators, bloggers, photographers, and audio-visual broadcasting equipment operators. These challenges that creative workers face are even more pronounced in peripheral regions outside major global cities like London, Los Angeles, and New York (Florida, 2022).

This report is focused on York—a city that encapsulates both the challenges and opportunities inherent in peripheral creative urban economies (Salamon, 2025). We aim to better understand the physical workspaces that support York’s creative economy and to identify the types of spaces needed to foster enhanced university-industry engagement, including collaboration with workers’ membership organisations like York Creatives and York’s Guild of Media Arts. Our study is particularly timely given the development of York Central, one of the UK’s largest city centre regeneration initiatives (York Central Partnership, n.d.), which may

offer a unique opportunity to create new and dynamic creative industries spaces. Additionally, our study underscores the importance of evaluating creative workspaces not only for their potential economic impact but also for the perceived social and professional benefits that they offer to creative workers in urban centres (Chapain & Sagot-Duvaurox, 2020).

Our study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Where and how do York’s creative professionals work in terms of spaces, places, mobility, and technology use?

RQ2: What are the strengths and limitations of York’s shared and co-working spaces for creative industries workers?

To address these questions, we employed a mixed-methods approach, adapting a creator workers’ inquiry (Salamon & Saunders, 2024). We integrated participatory mapping

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during a self-organised workshop and an exhibition (Swords & Jeffries, 2015; Swords et al., 2019) along with an online survey distributed through networks including York Creatives and relevant Facebook groups. The data collected enabled us to identify key themes regarding the spaces that York's creative workers use, value, and wish to see further developed. In the following sections, we provide background context on the challenges and historical loss of creative spaces in York, detail our methodology, present our findings of key themes, and offer recommendations. We discuss how industry stakeholders could address creative workspaces in York.



PICA Studios, York

(Photo credit: Ben Porter)

BACKGROUND

The arts, cultural activity, creative practitioners, creative workers, however you define them, need spaces to thrive. Spaces to make, learn, share, exhibit, practice, develop, sell are crucial to foster and sustain cultural and creative activities. Without them, artists suffer and cities lose out.

The Challenges of Finding Space for Art

York's creative scene is vibrant, innovative and a valuable asset for the city. We're home to individuals, companies and other organisations who are making a difference to peoples' lives locally, nationally and globally through art, culture and creative practice. But finding a space suitable to produce and exhibit work is increasingly challenging (Salamon, 2025).

York's 2000 year history is a major asset and helps the city attract nearly nine million tourists a year, including 1.2 million from overseas. York's built environment has evolved from Roman capital of the north, through Viking and Norman conquest, to Georgian and Victorian elegance. These developments have created a city difficult to navigate by car, with eclectic buildings, over 2000 of which are listed, and a patchwork of 35 conservation areas. Partly due to its size, York doesn't have the number of former warehouses and factory buildings which typify post-industrial northern cities. Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield have all successfully reused old industrial spaces for cultural use, but in York

these are most often converted into bars, apartments or knocked down to build student accommodation. The city also lacks high-rise office buildings which characterise similar cities of York's administrative status.

The small size of buildings and their conservation status combine to constrain the availability of space for creative practitioners.

Where there is disused space, such as upper floors of buildings in the city centre, a complex set of issues mean making the most of them is difficult. A 2013 report by the North of England Civic Trust found that building owners and investors often don't know the options for changing use, are put off by the process and/or don't see any incentive in doing so.

Brexit, austerity, the coronavirus pandemic and the cost of living crisis are all playing a role in the current situation. Cuts to funding for arts and culture at a national and local level means it is harder to survive making art, and with rents and costs rising, we've seen a series of creative spaces in the city lost. This is compounded by the relatively high general costs of living in York which make it especially difficult for new and emerging artists.

Support to cope with these challenges

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hasn't had the desired effect. For instance, in 2020 the government issued a £3.36m Emergency Grassroots Music Venues Fund following the COVID-19 pandemic (BBC, 2020). However, according to the Music Venue Trust, 93% of music venues are not owned by the entity that operates them (MVT, 2023). Much of this recovery money, which came from the Culture Recovery Fund paid for by the taxpayer, has been used to meet the rent demands from private landlords rather than being invested in the future of local music scenes.

In terms of local governance, York City Council has highlighted the need for more and better spaces for creative workers in their Creative Strategy 2018-2023. But cuts and lack of dedicated officer for cultural and creative activities mean plans have not come to fruition.

Lost spaces

These recent issues are compounded by a longer history of disappearing spaces for arts and culture. Over the last few decades, York has lost significant cultural spaces. These include:

York Arts Centre, Micklegate, 1968 - 1999

A space for artists, exhibitions and performances in an old church in central York.

"Non-stop all sorts of events, exhibitions, gigs. Everything was 1) encouraged, 2) thoughtful, positive, critical in outlook. Right in the city centre" (comment by exhibition attendee).

"I saw loads of theatre at Micklegate Arts Centre in the 1980s, UV light puppetry sticks in the mind!"

(comment by exhibition attendee).

Impressions Gallery, 1972 - 2007

An independent photography gallery.

Currently operating in Bradford after relocating from Castlegate.

The Fishergate Centre, Fishergate, 1986 - 2007

A space for micro-businesses managed by Norman Whyte, Heidi Green and Vanita Grad.

Provided vital start-up space for many creative businesses including Lazen-byBrown, Aesthetica, Designation and Bright Five.

Stereo (fka Certificate 18), Gillygate, closed 2012

Live music venue.

"Lots of gigs and producing many cabaret shows - had to stop due to lack of venues" (comment by exhibition attendee on the loss of music venues)

The Junction, Leeman Road, closed 2013

Pub and live music venue on the edge of the city centre.

"The junction is good because they often have live music and DJs. Drinks are reasonably priced and over all its decent for a night out." (online review)

The Quilters Guild Museum, Peas-holme Green, 2008 - 2015

Britain's first museum and gallery dedicated to quilting.

"The decision to close the Quilt Museum and Gallery is profoundly disappointing, but we can take comfort in

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the knowledge that since it opened we have welcomed over 75,000 people to over 50 exhibitions and introduced many visitors to the joy of quilts and quilting.”

(Guild President, Vivien Finch 2014)

The Duchess, Stonebow, closed 2016

Venue which hosted music, comedy and club nights.

“Very nice venue for live music and great staff to work with”

(Yelp review, 2013)

Nevermind, Stonebow, closed 2016

Bar and music venue

Weekly jazz and blues nights and it was a regular gathering place for York’s music scene for the brief period it existed

The Hungry Artist Cafe, 2014 - 2017

A cafe with art and creative activities.

“...surrounded by a wide range of affordable artworks of different kinds and niches..., we can life draw almost every Thursday evening and have regular Art lab/open mike sessions to boot. What more can you ask for....it's a great place for artists of all niches and generations to meet.”

(Google review, 2015)

Fibbers (aka Old Fibbers, aka OG Fibbers), Toft Green, closed 2018

500 capacity events space.

“I love it. Superb venue, friendly staff, superb location.” (online review)

“Great atmosphere, nice people and brill sound...bit slow to get served but that’s gigs for ya!” (online review)

Bar Lane Studios, Bar Lane, 2010 - 2019



Flyer courtesy of Mike Jeffries

Self-described as “a Thriving and Diverse Network of Artists and Creatives Working Under One Roof.”

According to McGee, Tower Street, 2005 - 2022

“Arts lessons at According to McGee: sorely missed” (comment by exhibition attendee)

York Photography Studio, Acomb Road, 2014 - 2022

“Loved this studio so many fond memories” (comment from Facebook)

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The New School House Gallery, Peasholme Green, 2009 - 2023

“This gem is the insider’s favourite in York. Large, airy, light-filled space... There is an ever-changing display of art, record player and beautiful garden views. Always an interesting selection of people and good wifi. A great place to work or to meet friend”
(tripadvisor review, 2019)

Village Gallery, Colliergate, 2018 - 2023

“A gem of a shop selling gorgeous collectibles and hosting a gallery showcasing local artists.” (tripadvisor review, 2019)



Panelists at the exhibition launch (L to R): Owen Turner, Emily Stubbs, Dawn Wood, Phil Bixby and Emma Coffield

(Photo credit: Ben Porter)

MORE THAN A BUILDING

Yorgos Paschos is undertaking a PhD in the Department of Archaeology at the University of York assessing the communal heritage value of grassroots music venues in York. His work highlights the importance of maintaining spaces for creativity and he contributed to the exhibition in July:

“My PhD explores the heritage significance of grassroots music venues (GMV). Of particular interest is their importance for engagement with local communities, their heritage both as physical spaces and social hubs, and their cultural and financial impact on the places in which they are situated. More specifically, the research assesses the heritage values that local people and audiences attach to these venues; the aesthetic, the evidential, the historic and the communal. GMVs are typically small, social hubs that play a significant role in the formation of personal and collective identities by nurturing relationships between live music, performers and audiences.

The Fulford Arms is a 180-capacity venue with more than 200 entry-level musicians and established acts headlining or supporting gigs. The premises was built in 1801 under the name ‘The Barrack Tavern’ to provide leisure activities for local troops stationed at the neighbouring Cavalry Barracks. During the 1970s and more specifically due to an IRA attack on Strensall Camp on 11th June 1974, the landlady renamed the pub ‘The Fulford Arms’, inspired by the nearby village. In 2014, it was transformed into a GMV.

The Crescent Community Venue is a 300-capacity venue. Established

before the First World War as a working men’s club, the Crescent quickly became a hub for serving the local community in various social and recreational capacities. In 2016, the Crescent transitioned from a traditional working men’s club to a vibrant community music venue focusing on live music and other cultural events.

The Crescent Community Venue and The Fulford Arms foster a sense of belonging. By hosting community-oriented activities and gigs, they nurture collective identities and local subcultures. As socially and financially accessible cultural hubs, they provide a safe space, playing an essential role in supporting mental health and well-being through the collective experiences of co-existing in a welcoming and warm community environment. Through these everyday heritage practices, such venues are transformed from music spaces to inhabited cultural places where people develop strong communal bonds and attach values. More than buildings and music venues, places such as these are heritage sites which do not only facilitate the formation and sustainability of local communities and their heritage, are run by the local community.”

DATA COLLECTION

Participatory Mapping

During the workshop in May and the exhibition in July, participants were asked to reflect on the role of the city in their creative practice by annotating maps of York.

Data were collected in two ways: Participants were provided with a choice of maps of York which featured the city and hinterland, the city within the A64/A1237 ring road, or the city centre. With coloured pens and pencils, participants highlighted the map to indicate places which: bring joy; are a source of inspiration; constrain creativity; enable creativity; have an important role in work. There was also the option to add new categories. Building on ideas prompted by the first task, participants were given blank sheets of A3 paper and a pile of Sharpies and coloured pencils. They were asked to draw their ideal creative space and factors which made it successful. Responses included plans of buildings, depictions of rooms and studios, lists of desires and statements about needs. Extracts from these exercises are included in this report.

The outputs from participants were analysed for their content and a series of themes emerged. In the annotated maps, cultural venues and festivals was a common inclusion that directly relates to the work of creative practitioners. Also related to participants' work were the universities (University of York and York St John University) and city libraries. Areas for inspiration and unwinding included

green spaces (particularly the River Ouse), independent shops and cafes (especially on Fossgate and Gillygate), spaces for recreation and exercise, and social spots such as Spark and pubs.

Two key themes emerged from the maps as constraining participants' creativity: busy city centre places for shopping (e.g. Coney Street) and the train station; and the council.

In a second task, ideas and success factors for creative spaces have been grouped into five common areas and supplemented with additional knowledge from our conversations with people during the workshop and exhibition. They represent a wishlist across all creative disciplines and participants recognised that development of new creative spaces will always involve compromises.

Questionnaire

Following the May workshop and the July exhibition, we conducted a survey to explore creative workers' perceptions on the availability and role of creative spaces in York and to identify ways to better meet their distinct needs. The survey aimed to determine the types of spaces that support the creative economy in York and to outline actionable steps for addressing creatives' workspaces. We collected responses from July to October 2024 on the York Creatives website, in Facebook groups for creative workers and freelancers in York or the UK, and from direct



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outreach to individual creative workers and organisations in York. The survey received a sample (N = 55) from self-identified creative workers in York. Although the sample was small and not representative, its exploratory nature provides valuable insights that complement our other methods and datasets.

Adapting a creator workers' inquiry methodology (Salamon & Saunders, 2024), we used closed-ended questions to gather occupational and sociodemographic background information as context for analysing workspace-related responses. Respondents reported creative work experience ranging from less than a year to more than 20 years, with most having at least 10 years of experience. The majority had lived and/or worked in York for at least five years and primarily worked from home. However, many respondents had used various types of shared or co-working spaces in York, including the following most commonly-used spaces:

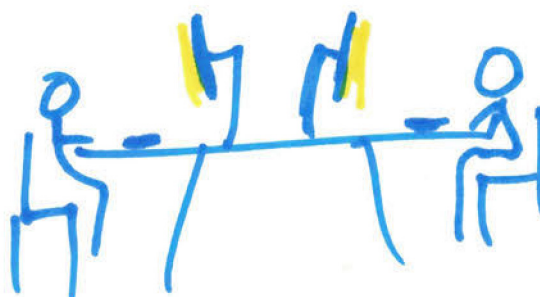
- Event spaces
- Meeting spaces
- Flexible (hot) desks
- Dedicated desks
- Artist studios
- Private offices
- Workshop spaces

The most common occupations reported included the following:

- Artist (e.g., drawing and painting artist, illustrator, or sculptor);
- Author, writer, or translator (e.g., blogger, copywriter, literary editor, poet, scriptwriter, technical writer, translator, or interpreter); and
- Photographer or audio-visual broadcasting equipment operator (e.g., camera operator, videographer, sound designer, or sound engineer).

We also included open-ended

questions to explore creatives' experiences with shared or co-working spaces in York, their benefits and limitations, and suggestions for improving these workspaces.



DEMAND FOR CREATIVE SPACES

This section explains the key findings of the project. They are based on the findings of the workshops, the questionnaire, the launch event and discussions during the exhibition.

Management and Operations

Effective leadership and facilitation...

...by people with experience of working in the creative industries and/or with artists. Numerous spaces have been successfully self-run by artists, but it is important to recognise the time and expertise it takes to do this and this is time away from creative practice. Considering the appropriate management option is crucial to make a creative space work.

Affordability

Many creatives reported insufficient access to affordable spaces for creatives tailored to their needs. Existing options were seen as prohibitively expensive. Some participants called for “tiered pricing” with flexible options, as one respondent puts it—monthly, daily, or hourly fees, fees based on the service used, or fully subsidised access for creatives with limited budgets. Logistical challenges, including high parking costs and unreliable public transportation, further exacerbate these economic concerns.

Publicity to encourage use

People highlighted the issue of not knowing what/who is doing what. York Creatives have a map to help address this, but it remains an issue: workspaces.yorkcreatives.com

Not corporate, not hotdesking

As we highlight below, having a space in which people can undertake their practice and make a mess without concern about breaking rules was key. There was a feeling that corporate owners, or a corporate ethos would constrain these things. The use of hotdesking is a common way for corporate operators to minimise mess as users have to clear their desk at the end of the day. This is not possible for some creative practice and this came through as an objection in the mapping exercises. But, as the previous point highlights, very short-term use of creative spaces was seen as an option for some.

Permanence...

...of the building and secure occupation of spaces for individuals. As Emily Stubbs (Pica Studios) and Dawn Wood (Fabrication) explained at the exhibition launch event, having to move your work, materials and equipment takes time away from making art.

On a day-to-day basis, being able to leave your work out and not pack it away every evening is crucial.

Month-to-month and year-to-year, time is wasted if rental contracts are short



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and people have to find new premises, pack up and move locations.

Tech support and repair facilities

In-house expertise to support the use, and prolong the life of specialised equipment was important to participants for whom kit was a key part of their practice.

Environmental sustainability

Contributing to enhancing the local environment and minimising impact on the planet was seen as important.

Use local suppliers for goods and services

...to support York's wider economy and build community links.

Working Environment

Collaboration and Inclusiveness

Respondents to the survey valued shared workspaces for fostering collaboration. They emphasised the potential for professional growth through informal networking, socialising, as well as sharing ideas with like-minded creatives.

It was important this is done in a way which is inclusive for people no matter their gender identity, disability and health issues, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, class etc. What came through the mapping exercises was that any space needs to be designed to be welcoming and inclusive. This includes providing ramps; viable height tables, desks and other furniture; suitable lighting; accessible toilets; sensory rooms; and good acoustics.

Sociality

Participants wanted opportunities to foster community, but also to enhance networking opportunities. As one respondent noted, such spaces provide opportunities for "the 'water cooler' moments" that private spaces lack.

Importantly, social events should be in places and times which don't exclude people. Not everyone is comfortable in bars and pubs, or around alcohol. And taking into account the availability of people with caring responsibilities is

crucial.

Personal Support

The role of shared workspaces in combatting loneliness and social isolation, particularly for freelancers and remote workers was highlighted through survey responses. There was an emphasis on how these spaces can improve mental health and effectively provide work-life separation.

Beyond social benefits, respondents valued access to pastoral care, peer support, and mentoring opportunities in these work environments, which can improve productivity and well-being. One respondent said that they



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“can gain knowledge from others and share expertise to benefit each other.” York creatives also see these shared workspaces as hubs for knowledge and skill-sharing. For one respondent, such workspaces are ideal venues for “observing techniques and how senior talent get things done.”

Having occupants at different career stages could facilitate formal and informal knowledge sharing and mentoring.

Safety

Spaces need to be safe, secure and without fear of harassment.

Comfortable

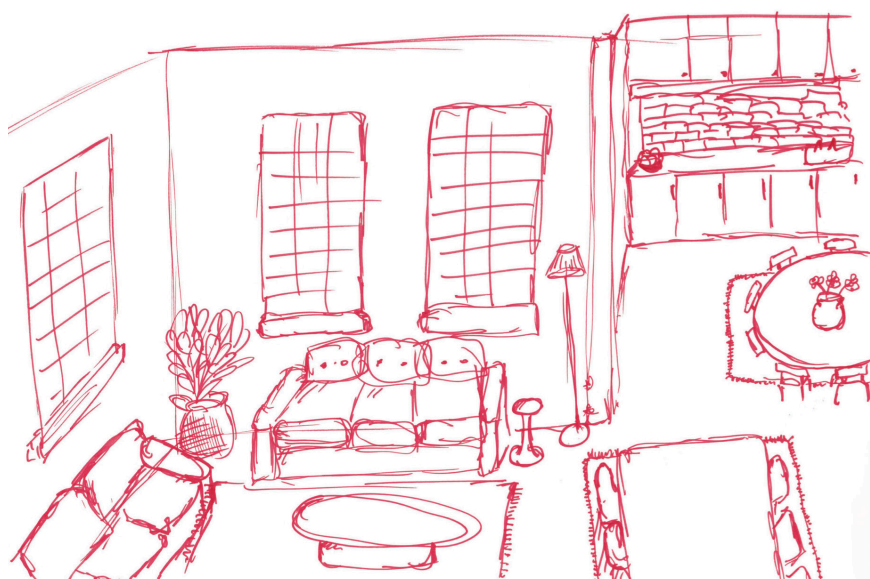
Participants drew sofas, bean bags and a variety of furniture which is comfortable. One even specified avoiding “itchy fabric”.

Vibrancy and noise

Spaces which were vibrant with people and art were in demand. However, noise, distractions, and lack of privacy were concerns raised in the survey. The creatives who responded suggested setting a work schedule for different activities within these spaces (e.g., working, chatting, and sharing). They also recommended creating “different zones,” according to one respondent, for individual work, collaboration, and socialising to set clear expectations. Additionally, many respondents said that they need the right creatives with whom to share these spaces to avoid “office politics.” As one respondent explains, “It would depend entirely on the individuals with whom one was sharing [....] One’s fellow artists might be mates or monsters.”

Reduced red tape

Being able to access spaces without lots of hoops to repeatedly jump through. Panelists at the exhibition launch



highlighted the time commitments of managing spaces they use or gaining access to spaces they want to work in. This is time away from their creative practice and detriment to their careers.

Celebration

Participants highlighted a desire for opportunities for celebrating each others’ work at exhibitions, but also day-to-day.

Out of hours access

As one participant put it, “Artists/



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creatives can work at any time of day/

night”, so considering this is important.

Location and Facilities

Well connected for travel

City centre locations were favoured for transport connections, although it was acknowledged that York’s road system is not very efficient. Hubs in the suburbs or rural hinterland were also highlighted as potential locations, although with the acknowledgment that transport links may not be as good.

On-site Facilities

Many participants viewed on-site amenities, such as cafes, bakeshops, and storage facilities as further contributing to job satisfaction. Additionally, creatives emphasised the value of accessing professional-grade equipment rentals. They also think that such creative spaces should be professionally arranged to maximise their productivity, according to one respondent, with “proper furnishings and facilities, not somewhere that feels makeshift and constantly ‘in progress’”. In addition, participants listed:

- Fast, reliable Wi-Fi
- Heating and cooling systems
- Equipment available to hire or borrow
- Changing rooms and shower
- Storage space

Support Facilities

Non-work amenities - access to things which enable you to do your work, and do it effectively - was highlighted as important. This includes being close to childcare options, parking, shops and cafes.

Work Spaces

Our analysis highlights the importance of workspaces that cater to diverse

creative needs. Respondents expressed a desire for specialised and personalised open-concept and private spaces suited to various activities:

- Workshops and studios for individuals
- Exhibition, performance and screening spaces
- Spaces for meetings (big and small)
- Rooms suitable for running workshops/talks
- Meeting rooms
- Practice and rehearsal spaces
- Media studios e.g. for recording music or podcasts.
- Audio-visual creative production studios (e.g. for social media content creation)
- Shops space to sell products

Space for messiness

For sculptors, many visual artists, ceramicists and fashion designers (amongst others), making a mess is part of the work. Additionally, spaces to spread out and work freely were highlighted.

Other

Other important factors people highlighted as important included:

- Plants and/or access to outside green space
- Natural light
- Good acoustics
- Books
- Sofas
- Artwork



RECOMMENDATIONS

York needs more and better suited spaces for the city's current and future creative community

York must invest in infrastructure to support the creative sector and its surrounding community. This includes physical spaces: spaces to make work, spaces to rehearse performances, spaces to stage performances, spaces to meet and gather, spaces to exhibit work, spaces for audiences to participate in the making of work. This also includes digital spaces: websites, forums, apps, and other communication platforms.

York's creative scene only exists because of the good will of creative practitioners

People are only willing to sacrifice so much time, money and effort. This should not be taken for granted.

Investment must be as much about managing the community and facilitating activities as it is about the design and location of the space.

Communities are dynamic and forever changing. Those new to the community need entry points to help them make contacts and learn about what is available in the city to support them. This has largely been done by volunteers over the past decade, however this is unsustainable in the

long term and we shouldn't rely on it.

The value of artistic and creative production must be valued by the city and not marginalised by activities which are seen as more profitable (e.g. tourism and real estate).

The City Council needs a cultural and creative industries strategy which prioritises qualitative outcomes over economic metrics, and an operational plan which prioritises space for creative practitioners to work. The Council should be accountable to a board of artists and other creatives.

No silver bullet. Different disciplines need different things.

There is no one-size-fits-all creator space. Even within one category of space, e.g. 'spaces to make work', what a painter needs will differ to what a writer needs, which will be different to what a musician needs.

Longevity is key. Community ownership is the only way to ensure this.

Creative projects will always be at the mercy of profit focused landlords when using properties that are commercially leased. The community needs to own the infrastructure to ensure cultural, social and economic benefits are felt by York's residents, and not extracted by absent landlords.



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The *York Narrative*, developed by the Council in partnership with leading organisations in the city, prioritises ‘pioneering with purpose’ and this aligns with community ownership.

Freedom to undertake artistic practice without unnecessary constraints is essential.

Noise and mess are inevitable parts of some forms of art, and this needs to be accepted.

Building on the city’s existing strengths and support organisations is important to create buy-in and meet needs of creative community.

All new development projects must prioritise benefits for the communities they purport to benefit.



Visitors to the Creator Spaces Exhibition, July 2024

(Photo credit: Ben Porter)

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