

Appendix 4: Viability of Dorset's Cultural Sector in 2026

During consultation on this strategy, concerns were repeatedly raised on the precariousness of the cultural sector, particularly for organisations in receipt of public funding and those working in the freelance sector. Alongside challenges, opportunities were also presented, some of which are specific to Dorset.

The following is a summary of the findings from online and in-person consultation bringing together the thoughts of over 150 people working in Dorset's cultural sector.

Dorset's cultural sector sits at a crossroads between resilience and precarity.

The sector is particularly concerned by **funding and financial sustainability**. This is not a surprise given the changes in the national funding landscape. Between 2009/10 and 2022/23, Arts Council England's core funding decreased by 18%. Over the same period, local government funding across England decreased by 48%. Dorset Council, however, has maintained the level of its funding for culture and, possibly uniquely for local government, has an open process for organisations to apply both for regular and project funding.

Access to new funding streams, sponsorship, and partnerships is now key to survival — not just growth. However, the overwhelming dependence on short-term or project-based grants creates a fragile foundation. Without sustained investment or diversified income, the sector risks being locked into cycles of instability that limit its capacity for innovation, fair pay, and strategic development.

"We need to fundraise to cover deficits and to revise two business models so we don't make deficits again."

Despite financial strain, **collaboration and partnership working** remain powerful sources of optimism. Artists, organisations, and venues increasingly view cooperation — both locally and across regions — as essential to maintaining creative momentum. Shared resources, joint funding bids, and cross-sector partnerships are practical responses to isolation and competition. This spirit of collaboration shows a sector that, whilst financially constrained, is socially and creatively rich, with the potential to strengthen Dorset's identity as a place of cultural ambition.

"Collaboration is Dorset's superpower"

The sector's **viability also depends on visibility and infrastructure**. In some parts of Dorset, there's a lack of accessible venues, exhibition spaces, and marketing capacity, particularly in rural areas. Yet this challenge also presents opportunity: reimagining empty buildings as creative hubs, expanding community-based programming, and improving digital visibility can reinvigorate cultural participation.

Audience development and inclusive practice — reaching underserved and rural communities — are ethical imperatives as much as strategic.

“Without a venue there is no opportunity.”

Finally, Dorset’s cultural sector is determined to **adapt and evolve**, even within constraints. From developing new work to engaging in digital and international projects, the sector demonstrates entrepreneurial energy and deep commitment to local identity. However, the sector’s long-term viability will hinge on systemic support — fair funding, cultural recognition, and joined-up strategic working. Without these, the sector’s creative vitality risks being overshadowed by burnout and economic fragility. With them, Dorset could consolidate its growing reputation as a rural region defined by creative resilience, collaboration, and place-based cultural strength.

“Levelling it up so it’s sustainable for me as well as ambitious.”