

The pulse of the movement:

Civic Arts Organisations in 2021



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION

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VISION

About the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation based in Portugal, with offices in London and Paris. It acts in the fields of arts, social welfare, education and science. Based in London, the UK Branch is focused on building coalitions to tackle complex global problems. It looks ahead, thinking globally and acting locally, to create the conditions for change by connecting across borders of all kinds – national, cultural, organisational, disciplinary and social. The UK Branch prioritises the vulnerable and underserved in the UK and elsewhere.

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About the Civic Role of Arts Organisations Programme

The Civic Role of Arts Organisations programme was created in 2017 by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch) with an overarching aim to shine a spotlight on arts organisations that are reinvigorating their civic role in imaginative and stimulating ways. The initiative was influenced by the Foundation's previous Participatory Performing Arts programme, which revealed that a more holistic and democratic approach was needed across the arts sector. The programme's ambition is to build a movement of change-makers, with impact in their local communities, across the UK and internationally. It aims to connect all those who believe the arts are central to society and want their arts organisation to play a 'civic role'.

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1. Introduction

The pulse of the movement

Over the past two years of uncertainty and change, arts organisations have flexed and adapted to find better ways to support their communities and drive social recovery. The annual Award for Civic Arts Organisations, launched in September 2020 by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch), recognises the achievement of arts organisations who demonstrated a strong civic role during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The Award aims to highlight and celebrate civic arts practice and shine a spotlight on the vital role that cultural organisations play in building thriving, creative, and connected communities. The application data provides a unique snapshot of the sector – who civic arts organisations are, the work they do, the impact they have, and their future ambitions.

This report sets out the findings from Common Vision’s analysis of the application data from the Award for Civic Arts Organisations in its first two years. It primarily focuses on the most recent cohort of 202 applicants in 2021, drawing comparisons to the 260 applicants in 2020 where relevant. Whilst only 19% of organisations applied to the Award in both years, our analysis has found a remarkable degree of consistency in terms of the kinds of impacts, audiences, partners and methods reported by applicants between these years. 81% of applications were from new applicants in 2021, but many of the cumulative insights only differ by one or two percent from the 2020 applicants. This suggests that there is a ‘movement’ evolving, with a consistent set of practices and impacts, acting as a collective beyond the sum of its parts. This is what we term the ‘civic arts movement’. This report aims to describe the patterns and trends within this collective, and signpost pathways for the future.

1.1 Methodology

Common Vision was asked to conduct qualitative analysis of the data submitted by applicants to the Award for Civic Arts Organisations in 2020 and 2021. The Award received 202 applications in 2021, and 260 in 2020. Across both years,

a total of 424 unique organisations applied to the Award. Each organisation answered a set of administrative questions on their organisation name, location, size, and charitable status. They then answered a set of questions about how their organisation adapted their work during the pandemic, how they worked with communities to develop this response, what impact the work has had so far, and how they plan to build on it for the future.

Our research analysed all open text responses, as well as closed responses (such as location and size). To analyse the open text responses we started with a manual analysis of a random sample of applications, to determine keyword sets relating to the work, audiences, and impact described. Our team then analysed all applications using these keyword sets, followed by manual quality assurance and refinement. In 2021 30% of applications were made using video, and these video responses were transcribed before analysis.

Due to the nature of the Award context, the short word limit, and lack of capacity to verify claims made within applications, this data is best treated as a story that arts organisations tell about themselves and their civic role, rather than a neutral account of activity. Nevertheless, it contains valuable data for how arts organisations perceive the civic role and articulate their activities through that framework.

The Award for Civic Arts Organisations: Note on the two application cohorts

The Award for Civic Arts Organisations was launched in September 2020. In the first year, applications closed in November 2020, the recipients were announced in March 2021. When we refer to applicants in 2020, we are referring to the first year’s cohort of applicants.

The second round of the Award closed in November 2021, with the recipients announced in March 2022. When we refer to applicants in 2021, we are referring to the second year’s cohort of applicants.

In 2020 applicants answered three questions: first, on the impact of the pandemic; second, on how they developed work with audiences; and third, impact and future plans. The questions in 2021 changed slightly, with information on impact and future plans being asked as two separate questions.

2. Who is in the movement?

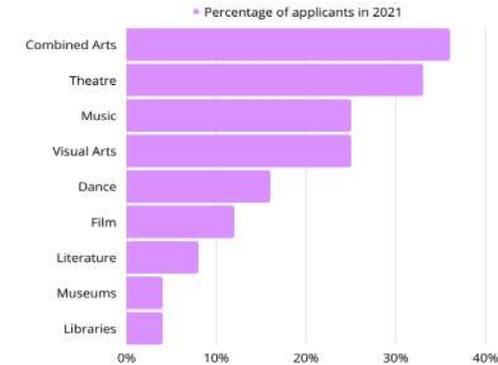
Our analysis shows there is a growing movement around the civic role of arts agenda. Over 400 arts organisations of all sizes and disciplines, spread across towns and cities in the UK, share a common goal of improving wellbeing and building stronger communities through culture and creativity.

2.1 Disciplines and artforms

Civic arts organisations use many artforms, with combined arts, theatre, music and visual arts being the focus of the majority of organisations. **30%** of organisations who applied in 2021 said they work with more than one distinct artform, for instance specialising in both film and music.

- **36%** of the applications were from **combined arts** organisations
- **33%** produce **theatre**
- **25%** specialise in **music**
- **25%** specialise in **visual arts**
- **16%** work with **dance**
- **12%** produce **film**
- **8%** work with literature, **4%** are museums, and **3%** are libraries

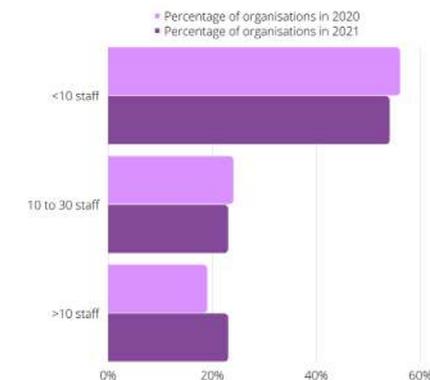
We can make approximate comparisons to the national picture by looking at Arts Council England's NPO data. Compared to Art Council England's NPO distribution, the Award applicants' disciplines are weighted towards **combined arts, theatre, dance, and music**. For instance, 8% of ACE NPO money goes to dance organisations, but double (16%) of Award applications include dance as an artform. **Museums** are in comparison underrepresented in the cohort, with 8.5% of ACE money going to museums, but only 4% of Award applicants were from museums. However it is important to note that this disparity could be interpreted as a reflection of how the Award was promoted, rather than a potential lack or strength of civic arts activity in particular disciplines.



2.2 Size of Award applicant organisations

Arts organisations with a civic role are large and small alike. Smaller organisations, those with under 10 members of staff, make up about half of the Award applicants:

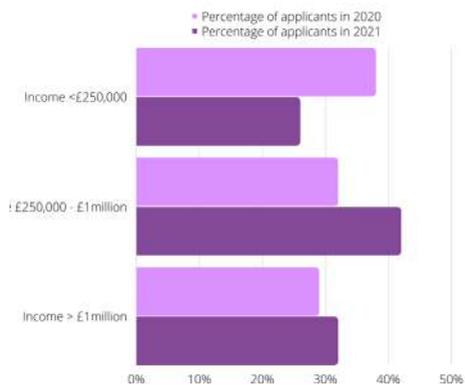
- **Small** organisations (with fewer than 10 staff members) submitted **54%** of Award applications in 2021. This was broadly consistent with 56% in 2020.
- **Medium** organisations (with between 10 and 30 staff members) made up **23%** of applications in 2021. This was comparable with 24% in 2020.
- **Large** organisations (with more than 30 staff members) accounted for **23%** of applications in 2021, again comparable to the 2020 figure of 19%.



In terms of organisational size by income, there is a relatively even distribution across applicants. Income bands fluctuated between 2021 and 2020, with a greater proportion of organisations earning over £250,000 applying to the Award in 2021 than before. This might reflect some organisations having boosted income in 2021 as a result of the Cultural Recovery Fund (65% of applicants in 2021 had received Cultural Recovery Fund grants).

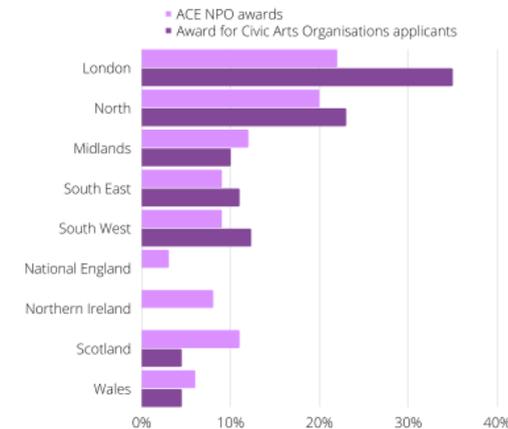
- **26%** in 2021 were by **small** organisations (income under £250,000), compared to 38% of applications in 2020.
- **42%** in 2021 were by **medium** organisations (defined here as income between £250,000 - £1,000,000) compared to 32% of applications in 2020.
- **32%** in 2021 were by **large** organisations (income £1,000,000+) compared to 29% of applications in 2020.

Looking at the national picture, organisations with an income of over £750,000 make up 45% of Arts Council NPO grants, a higher proportion than the Award applicants. This suggests the Award, and potentially the overall civic role of arts agenda, attracts more smaller organisations than are granted core public funding.



2.3 Regional spread of Award applicants

Civic arts organisations are based in towns and cities across the whole of the UK. The regional spread of the Award applicants is roughly in line with Arts Council England’s NPO distribution, with a quarter of applicants based in the North of England, and roughly 10% in the West, South East and Midlands respectively. **London** based organisations are slightly **overrepresented** among Award applicants.



However, organisations from **Northern Ireland, Scotland** and **Wales** are underrepresented within the cohort of Award applications, with no applications from Northern Ireland in 2021 (and only 10 organisations from Northern Ireland in 2020, amounting to 4% of applicants). The proportion of Award applicants outside of England is about half the proportion of arts organisations which get core funding from a UK arts council. This may be a reflection of the Award’s publicity and limits to its reach, rather than an indicator of the quality or strength of civic arts practice outside of England. In chapter five we consider how more could be done to grow the presence and vibrancy of civic arts movement in **Northern Ireland, Scotland** and **Wales**.

3. How civic arts organisations work with communities

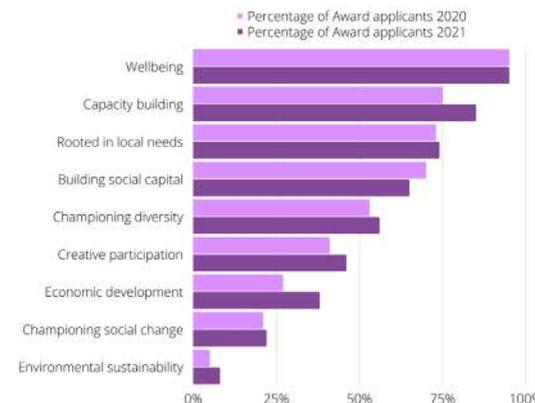
Behind the statistics about the composition of the civic arts movement, there are thousands of people, projects and communities with intricate relationships to culture and social impact. The Award applications revealed how applicants had reimagined how they engage with their communities, how they focused in on local impact, and at the same time aimed to spark national policy change. Yet within this breadth we can see some clear patterns emerging – of what organisations in the civic arts movement do, and what the movement is achieving together.

The findings below are based purely upon self-reported activity as part of the Award application process – given that applicants are self-selecting, it should not be seen as representative of the whole arts and culture sector. All of our findings are presented as ways that organisations describe their work, rather than necessarily being a systematic breakdown of the work they are actually doing.

3.1 Civic impacts and drivers

The civic role of arts agenda broadly connects organisations who play a civic role in their communities, work for broad social benefit, and aim to help build a cultural democracy.¹ Our analysis of the Award applications therefore focused on impact – what drives organisations’ work, and what they are trying to achieve.

We considered these outcomes through the eight principles set out in the Foundation’s *Rethinking Relationships* report, commissioned in 2017 by the Foundation to map the civic role of arts organisations landscape in the UK, and which informed the judging criteria for the Award.² The principles are: rooted in local needs; championing co-creation; capability building; building social capital; championing diversity and the disadvantaged; engaging communities with artists; providing change; replicability and sustainability.



- **Capability and wellbeing:** Our analysis split this principle into two separate categories of wellbeing and capacity building.
 - **Wellbeing** remains overwhelmingly the most prominent driver and/or impact stated, with 95% of applicants in 2021 describing improved wellbeing as a driver/impact of their work. This was the same figure in 2020.
 - **Capacity building** was then the next highest driver/impact with 85% of applicants describing impacts for participants’ skills, knowledge, or capabilities. This was also one of the most significant increases in reported impacts, a 10% increase on the 2020 figure of 75%.
- **Rooted in local needs** is consistently among the top three principles, cited by **74%** of applicants.
- **Building social capital** ranked fourth with **65%** of applicants pursuing related drivers/ impacts. References to social cohesion were included in this category.
- **Championing diversity and the disadvantaged** was a weaker driver/impact. Our analysis looked for mention of specific marginalised groups and found that relevant key words were cited by **56%** of applicants. In Section 3.2 we break down the audiences with which arts organisations worked.
- **Championing social change, discussion and debate**, and challenging orthodoxies was in our analysis a weaker driver/impact, with only **22%** explicitly discussing social change and social action. However, it may be that providing change is simply an implicit driver to work and so our analysis may underemphasise its importance.

Although our analysis also tried to develop data for the *Rethinking Relationships* principles ‘**sustainability**’ and ‘**engaging communities with artists**’, these impacts have been harder to code.

- **Sustainability:** We attempted to separate sustainability of business model from lasting social impact. However, this is highly subjective and social impact is often an implicit quality attached to impacts, so could not be inferred accurately.
- **Engaging communities with artists.** Almost all applicants are connecting people with artists in some way, by definition of being arts organisations. As with ‘providing change’, the likelihood is that this is an implicit motivator/ impact.

It is also worth highlighting three further impacts/drivers that were self-described by arts organisations which fall outside of the existing *Rethinking Relationships* eight principles:

- **Creative participation.** We noted that for **46%** of organisations creativity and expression was seen as an impact in itself, associated with imagination, expression and joy. This was broadly consistent with 41% of applicants in 2020.
- **Economic development.** **38%** of organisations sought to generate impacts to do with employability, and economic development. This was one of the most significant increases, compared to 27% in 2020.
- **Environmental sustainability** and climate action were also mentioned as an impact in **8%** of applications. This was a slight increase to 5% in 2020.

“[A member of the] NHS Neighbourhood Team Lead South, explains [the impact of our work on one participant]: ‘I witnessed what I can only describe as sheer magic. I feel so privileged to have witnessed how her confidence grew and the sheer pleasure at what she had created has left me with a permanent smile and a realisation of the power art has and the amazing work you do’. ”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

“Our experience during the COVID-19 pandemic has defined our civic role as hyperlocal, utilising creativity to inspire, build confidence and resilience, and help people to connect, galvanise and convene [...] We have learned that building partnerships with local community groups and organisations to co-create with the local community provides the most effective foundation for our engagement, and to encourage community agency.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

“Our experiences since March 2020 have demonstrated to us that our musicians bring deep levels of intrinsic and instrumental artistic value to communities and individuals that were already some of the UK’s most isolated and vulnerable. The practice that our musicians model brings a value that encompasses creativity, wellbeing, and a sense of self, identity and creative voice – of being heard – that it is usually absent in many of our participants’ lives.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

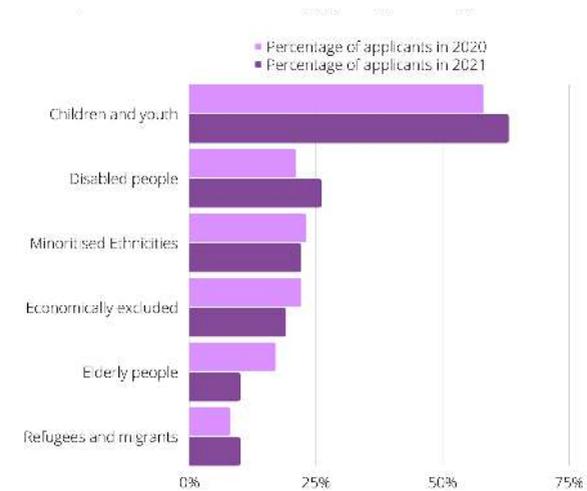
3.2 People and communities engaged by arts organisations

Organisations within the civic arts movement are often driven by representing, supporting, engaging communities. Approximately **half** of the Award applicants reported that they work with a targeted community – for instance care-experienced people, or residents of a particular town – and half work with an open community, stretching across differed social groups and locations. These were similar proportions to the first round in 2020.

Our inductive analysis looked at the audience groups mentioned by applicants. It should be noted that many applicants cited working with multiple communities – often within a wider open community. For instance, children are frequently mentioned in responses that are labelled ‘open community’.

- **Children and youth** are by far the most prevalent target group, and **63%** of Award applicants worked with younger people. Children and young people are often one aspect of a larger community an organisation works with, so whilst **63%** of all applicants worked with children, only **22%** of organisations named children and young people as their target audience.
- **Disabled people** and those with mental and physical illnesses were the next most frequently described as participants, by **26%** of Award applicants.
- **Black, Asian, and ethnic minority people and groups** are the next most frequently described, with **22%** of Award applicants describing work with minoritized ethnicities.
- People who are **economically excluded/disadvantaged** or in poverty were described by **19%** of organisations, often stating that they work in local areas that have been underinvested in.
- **10%** of applicants described working with **older people**. This was a notable decline from 17% of the previous year's applicants in 2021. One possibility for this variation could be because older people experienced acute vulnerability in the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, which then eased. Another reason is that older people are an 'organic' cultural audience so not fully represented in the responses.
- **Refugees and migrants** were targeted participants for **10%** of organisations' work.
- Below the **10%** threshold, there was a diversity of other groups mentioned such as LGBTQ+ people (~6%), homeless people (~5%), people in the criminal justice system (~5%) and victims of domestic violence (~4%).

Among the applicants that work with targeted communities (i.e. specific closed groups of people or specific communities of identity or experience), **20%** of organisations focus on working with artists – those with an established or emerging professional creative practice – specifically from the targeted community, for instance supporting and promoting the work of disabled or migrant artists. Whilst the majority of organisations work with amateur and general audiences.



“We work with people with complex support needs (learning disabilities, autism, behaviours that challenge, physical disabilities, other health conditions) and their families. The pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on their lives: many have experienced acute isolation, erosion of rights, lack of access to essential equipment and loss of care provision. [...] The pandemic has brought into sharp focus how important care and compassion is for ourselves and each other. [...] We have changed how we describe ourselves, becoming a ‘collective’ of equals which reflects the non-hierarchical collaborative nature of how we work.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

“The pandemic highlighted the role that we, as an arts organisation, can play in effecting meaningful change within a community that has already experienced displacement and trauma. Our premises are adjacent to Grenfell Tower and our proximity, engagement and networks meant we could offer immediate refuge and ongoing support to those directly affected by the devastating fire in 2017. The pandemic further compounded this trauma and we saw ourselves on the front line when the community turned to us for support once again. We realised that being embedded in the area long-term has been key to authentic community relationships.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

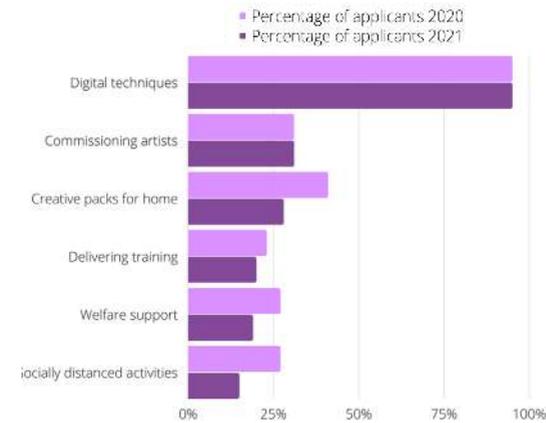
“With education departments closed, and prisons locked down 23 hours a day, we have seen holistic value of the awards - prisoners reported how important creativity had been to them, their mental health and wellbeing. ‘Being creative, especially in lockdown, has really helped me with my mental health. Being in prison is hard, but being inside and in full lockdown, well that’s a lot harder. My artwork has kept me going’.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

3.3 Methods used to develop and deliver work

Organisations within the civic arts movement use a range of methods to engage communities and deliver their work. Our analysis reflects the Award application questions, which ask organisations to describe how they adapted during the pandemic. Overall, the following patterns emerge:

- **Digital techniques.** Perhaps not surprisingly, digital engagement methods were referred to by **95%** of applicants – a figure consistent with 2020. It appears to now be a ubiquitous feature of civic arts work.
- **Commissioning artists** and giving **micro-grants** was referenced by **31%** of organisations. This is the same figure as 2020, suggesting it is a stable part of the practices of civic arts organisations.
- **Delivering training** was described by **23%** of applicants, and **mentoring or coaching** activities also by **23%**.



There were a few notable changes in delivery methods between 2021 applicants and the previous 2020 applicants, perhaps reflecting the easing of social distancing restrictions.

- **28%** of arts organisations described developing **creative packs or arts kits for home/remote use**, compared to 41% of the 2020 applicants, suggesting a phase out of at-home engagement approaches that were developed in the initial lockdowns.
- **19%** of applicants mentioned providing **welfare support** and **mutual aid** for participants, a lower figure than 27% of applicants in the previous year.
- Similarly, only **15%** of organisations described doing some kind of **socially distanced, in person activity** such as doorstep or outdoor performances, compared to 27% in 2020.

“Since the pandemic, relationships with our partners have tightened. We have found that doing one-to-one work with vulnerable young people has been really effective. We started with just one young person, but demand has grown significantly, such that this one-to-one engagement is going to become a key part of the organisation’s work.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

“Throughout lockdown, people withdrew into their homes, but also into themselves. Amongst the uncertainty, we noticed our communities were making things, such as stitching, knitting, painting and cooking. Although we couldn’t see each other in-person, we could still share and celebrate what was happening. So, throughout lockdown, our small shop front became a space for showcasing and celebrating these creations. [...] It is this process that transformed how we work with communities. Our reinstated 2021 festival exhibited these artworks. Our communities co-organised a parade through the island, and a group of young people co-curated a section of the festival from their perspectives. During the festival, the impact we saw was in a confidence of community members to attend. Re-emerging from lockdown is an incredibly anxious time for many, as well as joyous for others. Our community seeing themselves in the festival alongside International Contemporary Artists brought a social confidence, and a creative confidence.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

“We commissioned 90 art packs for vulnerable families, a brand new community newspaper to redress a social and digital divide, and a socially distanced carnival. We employed 40 people, paying residents throughout for their time and support. We used our privilege as a cultural institution to ensure those who had less had more; more employability, more information, more connectivity and more choice in how services directly fed their needs. We placed our resources fully into the community and we kept going.”

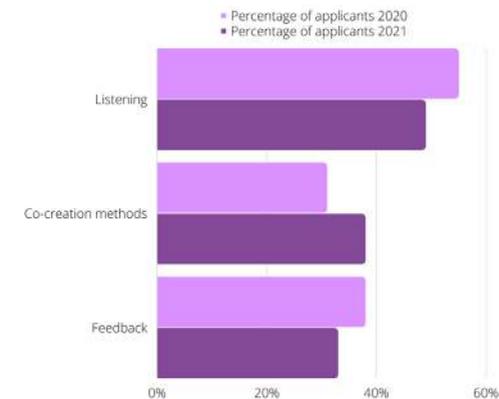
Longlisted applicant, 2020

In the addition to the ‘what’ of civic arts organisations’ work over the past two years, and the mediums and tools they used to deliver the work, we also looked at the ‘how’ – how the work was developed and how communities were included in designing the programmes in which they took part.

- **38%** explicitly described using **co-creation methods**, designing their programmes and work with community members. This is a slight increase on the 31% of applicants in 2020.

- **49%** of applicants described **consultation and listening** methods, reflecting on what their audiences wanted and designing work for them. This is comparable to the 55% of applicants in 2020.
- **33%** described using more formal methods of collecting **feedback and producing evaluation** to develop their work. Again this was not a strong variation from 38% of applicants in 2020.

However, **27%** of applicants did not describe developing their work with their participants and audiences through any of the methods above. Again this is closely comparable to 24% in 2020. In some cases, this might be because co-creation is implicit, and so deeply engrained within an organisation’s work that it is not explicitly discussed. Yet it may also point to a gap in practice in some cases.



“Since the beginning of the pandemic, we’ve had one guiding question: how can we be useful? All of our work and response in this time has been led by engaging our participants, our communities and ourselves in a process of radical and generous listening, to support the development of voice and agency.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

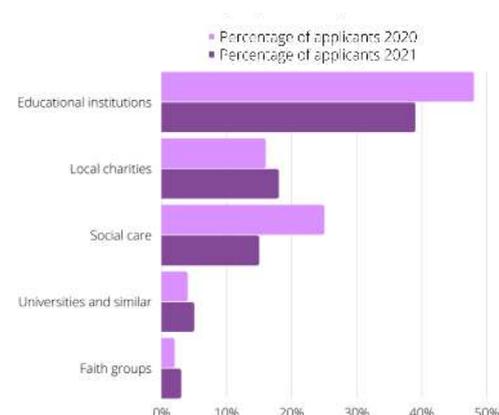
“We took our community conversations online during the pandemic. In the past year, we have led over 150 Community listening events, and we’ve had over 1000 attendees from charities, NHS, faith groups CCGs and councils. We’ve interviewed around 350 service users, including people with learning difficulties, carers, young people, teachers, art practitioners and schoolchildren. We’ve held 400 focus groups on digital capability for people in Surrey and elsewhere.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

3.4 Working in partnership

Partnership working is a strong feature of the civic arts movement. Civic arts organisations often aim to be collaborative and embedded in their communities so that they can reach diverse audiences and leverage wider social impact. **56%** of Award applicants in 2021 described working with partners in some way. The types of partners described, and the kinds of relationships that they developed together, were broad.

- **Schools and other educational institutions** were mentioned by **39%** of applicants. This was a notable decrease from 48% in 2020, perhaps reflecting school audiences’ return to more conventional performance and arts settings.
- **Social care** and support services were mentioned by **15%** of applicants, a decrease from 25% the previous year, perhaps reflecting the easing of lockdowns and opening of care homes.
- **Local authorities** and the council were described by **20%** of applicants – the same figure as 2020.
- **18%** of applicants mentioned working with **local charities, community orgs and VCSE groups** in their applications – the figure was 16% in 2020. **Faith groups** were mentioned explicitly by **3%** of organisations.
- **Universities, academics and research organisations** were described as partners by **5%** of applicants.



Often the partnerships described were highly specific, so these headline categories do not always do justice to the diversity and depth of partnership working within the civic arts movement.

“The pandemic has brought us closer to the care sector: we learnt how underfunded, under-supported and under-resourced this sector generally is. We learnt how much our music and dementia training programme was appreciated by care workers, and how valued and supported they felt by attending our online training, and how inspired they were to then use music themselves for everyday wellbeing in care home life.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

“Even though in-person delivery was impossible, our pandemic output increased considerably, with annual schools audiences growing from 7,000 to 30,000 students. We challenge and empower young people to be creative citizens and leaders using their voice and ideas to make change in themselves and the world around them.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

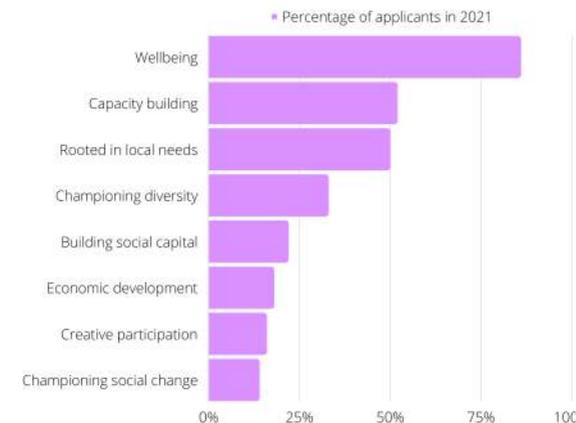
“As the pandemic drove many community groups in Sheffield to stop activity or into urgent care or action, we decided instead to slowly develop our partnerships to co-think how an arts organisation would adopt a civic role in the city. [...] Through these conversations with partners we developed a new model of working called the ‘co-location model’ as both an operational model and a way of co-developing our programme with artists, communities and places in relation to lived experiences of health, environmental challenges and social inequalities. The intention of the co-location model is to embed an arts organisation and its operations within third sector organisations, outside of typical arts and cultural spaces.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

4. Looking to the future

The civic arts movement is a hotbed of ambition and commitment to transformational social change. Award applicants set out big plans to build on the work developed during the pandemic in the future, seeking to embed and amplify the work for the benefit of the sector and their wider communities. This focus on being future facing, and sowing seeds for long term change is a key asset of the movement.³

- **50%** of the Award applicants want to deepen their **local impact** and strengthen their networks in their local community.
- **86%** intend to focus on improving **wellbeing** through their work.
- **52%** intend to use culture to build their communities’ **skills and capabilities**.
- **33%** want to focus on **diversity and equity**, either improving equity and inclusion within their own organisations, or championing it in the sector, their communities, or culture more widely.
- Building social **capital and social cohesion** remains a focus of **22%** of organisations as they look to the future. **18%** intend to focus on economic development.
- **16%** intend to focus on deepening **creative participation** and the intrinsic benefits of culture like imagination and joy.
- **14%** intend to focus on convening **discussion and debate**.



Looking to the methods civic arts organisations intend to use to develop their work in the future, we can also see some patterns of emerging practice. When reflecting on past work, the largest proportion of applicants used more traditional **consultation and listening** approaches to develop their work. Now, looking to the future, the largest proportion intend to use co-creation and **co-production** methods.

Digital work is here to stay, with **43%** of applicants intending to focus on developing their online offers and digital capacity in the future. However other mainstays of pandemic culture like **at-home packs**, **socially-distanced** provision, and direct **welfare support and mutual aid**, only feature in the future plans of a small minority of organisations (4%, 3% and 3.5% respectively).

Fostering a culture of collaboration and building **new partnerships** is central to **42%** of applicants' future plans. Most organisations name partners and networks they intend to develop relationships with, while others refer to schools, local authorities, academics, charities and community groups in more general terms.

Overall, the data paints the picture of a national movement committed to local impact, supporting people to thrive, and deepening communities' power within culture and society. The methods used to achieve this might not be the same as those they developed during the COVID-19 lockdowns, but they will build on the principles of social connection, solidarity and innovation.

"This project is a step towards creating a network of intergenerational musical connection across the country. We anticipate this model becoming a blueprint for improving intergenerational connections, eliminating loneliness and supporting wellbeing, which can be replicated across the UK. We already have strong national partnerships with leading care home groups, and a wide range of creative partners. Our approach has recently been commissioned by Surrey CCG [Clinical Commissioning Group], and there's potential for this model to be adopted by other CCGs."

Longlisted applicant, 2021

"The highly successful programs that we've run during the pandemic are models that can be replicated by others locally. [...] Our NHS partnerships are growing and widening to other Lincolnshire teams in order to amplify our learning and knowledge. The journaling project has demand from 10 schools in Grantham. Subject to funding, we'd like to develop a template that other areas can use with their own local creatives."

Longlisted applicant, 2021

5. Strengthening and developing the movement

The civic arts movement is creating a culture of creative participation, social connection, and civic action across communities. As individual arts organisations reflect on how they embed what they've personally learnt through the pandemic, there are also collective insights for the movement to draw upon. Through this period of repair and renewal, it will be important to focus on how individual organisations can help build a stronger, equitable and powerful movement championing the social impact of arts and culture.

Over the last two years, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch) has commissioned and supported a number of research projects as part of its Civic Role of Arts Organisations programme.⁴ Our analysis below identifies cross cutting themes within this body of research and tests the extent to which the Awards data – and patterns between the 2021 and 2020 cohorts – supports the insights presented elsewhere. Overall, our research demonstrated significant consistency within the kinds of organisations that applied to the Award in years one and two (in terms of size, location, and audience), and collective shifts in some areas of impact, methods and practice between 2020 and 2021. This pattern suggests that there is a clear movement or field of practice formed around the civic arts agenda. In this section of the report, we therefore zoom out to consider findings across both years.

- The **transformative impact of the pandemic** has been experienced across the civic arts movement. 100% of Award applicants in 2021 said that they had to adapt their working methods during the pandemic. 99% of organisations said they would not have done this work if the pandemic had not occurred – a significant uplift from 73% of applicants in 2020. For many this is likely to have been primarily evident in the shift to online working (which over 90% of applicants described in both years), but for others it may have been more significant.

In 2020 the [Creativity, Culture and Connection](#) report found that the pandemic had sparked significant rethinking, questioning and learning around mission and purpose for many arts organisations and individual artists. A year later research conducted by What Next? also emphasised that there is still a strong sense among cultural organisations of wanting to stop and review “their models, structures and practices in order to plan a stronger civic role in the future”.⁵ The 2021 Award data suggests that this sense of transformation is still strong. It would be interesting to know whether this process of reflecting and pivoting is still an active process in organisations, and what it would take to give organisations a chance to implement transformation at the scale of their ambitions and intentions.

“The pandemic gave us time both to reflect and accelerate our vision: our organisation learnt that our purpose is to continue to make social change and to make music that matters.”

Longlisted applicant, 2021

- The **impacts sought** by Award applicants, and the motivations that drove their work, largely reflect the original *Rethinking Relationships* principles, with local need, social capital and building capability all appearing in the majority of applications. However, we also saw how ways of describing civic impact among the applicants evolved over time. For instance, the language of **wellbeing** was used by over 90% of applicants in both years, and **intrinsic qualities related to creative participation** like joy, imagination and expression were described by over 40% in both years. These are qualities and impacts understood by the movement as being a crucial part of the civic role arts organisations play.
- **Co-production** was a strong feature of shortlisted organisations and evidenced in the approaches of all Award recipients. What Next?'s research on the civic arts movement in six UK regions described how “the participants highlighted the importance of handing over the reins and building collaborative relationships with communities through co-production and careful listening”.⁶ However, discussion of co-production came through less strongly in the wider body of application data, with under 40% of applicants describing co-production methods in both years, and more applicants mentioning traditional consultation and listening techniques.

This suggests that whilst many organisations are talking about and aspiring for co-production, fewer are finding ways to put it into practice. We could hypothesise that there is an appetite for co-production and democratising control over culture, but the movement is currently experiencing a skills, resource or confidence gap to putting it into practice.

- Similarly, **connections and partnerships** were a common feature in the shortlisted organisations, and much discussed in the What Next? consultation, but underrepresented in the Award application findings. Approximately 40% of the Award applicants did not mention any partnership work as part of their applications in both years. Where partnerships did occur, these were mostly with schools and universities (44% of applicants in 2021, 48% of applicants in 2020), but it is interesting to note that approximately that in both years, 20% of applicants were working with either local authorities, and 20% with health and social care providers. This underlines What Next?'s qualitative findings that “developing strong relationships outside the cultural sector was seen as the lowest priority” by organisations attending their focus group workshops, and more attention was paid to forging cross-sector collaborations within the arts.

The smaller proportion of organisations engaging with local charities, community groups and faith organisations in the Award data suggests more work is needed if culture is to become engrained in communities' social infrastructure.⁷ When we look at the national picture, the Centre for Cultural Value's large scale research [Culture in Crisis](#) shows that arts audiences were not more diverse during the pandemic.⁸ Therefore, could the civic arts movement could do more to break out of the art bubble?

- In **terms of power, inequality and representation**, we can see across the Award applicants that this is still a live issue for many organisations, with half of applicants in both years describing specific marginalised groups they are working with. Young people experiencing marginalisation, disabled people, people experiencing economic exclusion or living in poverty, and people of colour are the largest target audience groups. When organisations looked to the future in 2021, a third intended to work actively to improve their own diversity, or represent marginalised people in culture, communities, or society.

We can sense a shift in how the civic arts movement relates to questions of power and representation. The focus on outreach and inclusivity described in the original [Rethinking Relationships](#) report (2017), has now also turned inwards to consider representation and equity, as well as outwards advocacy of these issues. This mirrors findings from What Next?'s research, which suggests that between 2017 and 2021 the focus has turned to underrepresentation, power, and inaccessibility within the sector.⁹ Interestingly from the Award data, 20% of organisations see their role as championing marginalised artists in particular.

- The role of artists, and the extent to which **supporting freelancers** counts towards an organisation's civic role is interesting to consider. Commissioning and giving micro-grants to artists and freelancers was mentioned by 31% of organisations in both years. This is a higher proportion than the applicants who described giving mentoring and welfare support to non-artists (approximately 20% in both years).

We could see this as a weakness within the way organisations understand the civic role – that it is too inwards looking – or a strength in so far as they recognise the importance of a strong cultural ecosystem, and the work artists can do to support communities directly.

- The underrepresentation of organisations from **Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland** in the Award applicants is important to consider. It could simply be that the Award programme, and/or the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, has less reach and visibility in the devolved nations. Another interpretation could be that the practice and language of the civic role is quite different in the devolved nations.

In turn, What Next?'s research suggests that rural arts practice is under-researched, and “further support could be given to help rural arts practitioners understand what is unique and special about their work and for them to be empowered to share their skills with the wider arts sector.” The Award data does not collect information on rural vs. urban applications. Therefore, further research into both variations between nations and between rural and urban practice could be useful.

- On the other hand, the relatively equal representation of **different organisation sizes** should be encouraging. Previous research has suggested smaller, more agile organisations may be more comfortable playing a civic role, but this data demonstrates that larger organisations can also see their place in the civic arts movement.

The diversity of size among Award applicants suggests that a full ‘cultural ecology’ is represented in the movement. Our 2020 research [Creativity, Culture and Connection](#) highlighted the interdependent nature of individual arts organisations within a wider ecology of culture.¹⁰ Likewise Mark Robinson, the Civic Role of Arts Organisations evaluator, has described how “certain parts of the sector may adapt at different speeds and contribute different things to the adaptive cycle”.¹¹ In other words, the movement needs both small and fast organisation to innovate, experiment and challenge orthodoxies, as well as larger organisations to embed change and secure legacies.

5.2 Pathways for repair and renewal

As we transition out of the pandemic, new challenges and opportunities lie in store for the civic arts movement. In a time where the initial optimism and sense of shared purpose and community experienced during the pandemic have waned, civic arts organisations are ever more relevant. Research agency More in Common’s polling finds that the UK public now describes itself as divided (55%), intolerant (33%) and chaotic (32%), rather than united (1%).¹² The percentage of Brits believing “it’s everyone for themselves” has grown from 21% of the population in June 2020 to 74% in December 2021. Clearly, the government and public response to the COVID-19 crisis has not restored trust, agency and unity in communities as many hoped it would.

How can the civic arts movement respond to these challenges, and help communities restore their sense of hope and unity needed to face the turbulent and uncertain times ahead? Based on our analysis of the pulse of the movement, we can signpost some pathways for renewing the civic role for a new era.

- **Inward looking vs. outward looking** civic role. Civic purpose can be both inwards looking, focused on change, accessibility, and agency within the arts sector and cultural practice, as well as outwards looking, focused on social transformation in communities, using arts as a tool for liberation, challenge, and growing collective agency outside of the arts sector.

Our research suggests that to fulfil the latter role, connections between culture and social infrastructure – the activities, organisations, spaces, and assets that support the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community – need catalysing. The UK government’s Levelling Up agenda refocused efforts in civil society to articulate the importance of investment in local connections, community power, and regional equality. However, our analysis has shown that arts organisations often struggle to partner outside of the sector, and seek collaborators and allies primarily among other cultural practitioners. From another perspective, anecdotally we know that the social sector rarely turns first to cultural organisations for community support and transformation. What would it take for the movement to tackle insularity head on, without taking on the responsibilities of the state?

The civic arts movement could renew its focus of developing meaningful and collaboration cross-sector partnership, working with community groups, shops, faith communities, sports clubs, scientists, nature clubs, and more to recognise the culture that exists beyond formal art settings. Forming a clear, enabling narrative about what culture and arts intrinsically bring to the table will be crucial to making this work. One way to do this could be by tapping into the idea of **‘civic imagination’** – a proposal developed in the 2020 *Creativity, Culture and Connection* report, referring to how arts drive innovation, creativity, and renewal in an area, helping us imagine a better future. This open, exploratory imagination of what is possible, and what is achievable together, is something that local decision makers and frontline groups often struggle to do.

- **Social vs. environmental civic role.** Climate action and environmental sustainability have not previously been framed as core part of the civic arts movement and narrative. Currently, a small number of Award applicants highlighted work in this area, with 4% of organisations in 2020, and 8% of organisations in 2021 describing sustainability, environmental protection, and climate change. This may not reflect the actual picture on the ground, and it could be that many more organisations are working on climate action than those who described it in their Award applications. The civic role to date has largely been framed around social impacts for communities, but what would the civic role for the planet and nature look like?

As our awareness and urgency of the climate crisis grows day by day, the movement could consider how it makes climate action mainstream. How can every programme, activity, and event build the agency and hope needed in communities to tackle the crisis? This may involve exploring a range of experimental approaches, supporting programming about climate action, infrastructure change towards net zero, or sector-wide lobbying and campaigning.

- **Civic operations vs. civic programming.** The majority of applicants to the Award focused on programming, specific activities or initiatives projects ran to engage and support communities during the pandemic. The surprisingly low proportion of organisations using co-production (38%) suggests that organisations face a capacity and/or skills gap when embedding the civic role into their operations, governance, and infrastructure. The precarity of freelancers during the pandemic could be seen as a reflection of this gap. The gap in turn could be a barrier to deeply embedding the civic role into an organisations' DNA.

As the sector enters a new funding cycle, organisations could consider develop more democratic and civic core beyond programming. Organisations could ask what the civic role means in governance, decision making, HR, accounting, and reporting, both within individual organisations, and across the sector's infrastructure and funding bodies. These grey, operational, slow transformations may enable the civic arts movement to embed transformational civic values, practices, and impacts over the long term.

As the Civic Role of Arts Organisation programme nears its fifth birthday, this is a time for reflection, refocus and redesign. Whilst communities around the UK face great challenges – from the pandemic to the climate and economic crises – there are also great opportunities for ambition, imagination and civic transformation. The civic arts movement has a role to play in catalysing this transition, building a more equitable, connected and democratic world, and sector a cultural sector in its image.

Endnotes

- 1 The term *Cultural Democracy* describes an approach to arts and culture that actively engages everyone in deciding what counts as culture, where it happens, who makes it, and who experiences it. 64 Million Artists (2018), *Cultural Democracy in Practice* <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/CulturalDemocracyInPractice.pdf>
- 2 Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (2021), *Award for Civic Arts Organisations 'selection criteria'*, https://www.zealous.co/cgf_uk/opportunity/Civic-Role-Arts-Award
- 3 All data in this section is for 2021. Like-for-like analysis of 2020 data is not possible because in that edition of the Award the question on future plans (Q3) was merged with the question on past impact. In 2021 these questions were separate. Our scan found that in 2020 most organisations described past impact over future plans, and that accordingly the data set on future plans is not large enough to make meaningful conclusions.
- 4 The reports reviewed include King's College London's and James Doeser's case study analysis, Mark Robinson's evaluation, the What Next? Civic Role report, and Common Vision's 2020 Creativity Culture and Connection report, as well as wider conversations with the Foundation.
- 5 What Next (2021), *Civic Role of Arts Organisations Programme 2021 Workshops*.
- 6 What Next (2021), *Civic Role of Arts Organisations Programme 2021 Workshops*.
- 7 This Award data is supported by What Next's? finding that "there was a desire for more of this work to take place and develop further, particularly in relation to connection to social infrastructure", as well as the findings on the importance of social infrastructure within Creativity, Culture and Connection (2021), and the case study findings that "international comparison revealed that UK organisations were less likely to be connected to other civic infrastructure or social services".
- 8 Ben Walmsley et. al. (2022), *Culture in Crisis: impacts of Covid-19 on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here*, Centre for Cultural Value, <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CV/resources/culture-in-crisis-impacts-of-covid-19/>
- 9 What Next (2021), *Civic Role of Arts Organisations Programme 2021 Workshops*.
- 10 Caroline Macfarland and Matilda Agace (2020), *Creativity, Culture and Connection: Responses from arts and culture organisations in the COVID-19 crisis*, Common Vision, <http://covi.org.uk/dev4/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Creativity-Culture-and-Connection-Common-Vision-report-September-2020.pdf>
- 11 Mark Robinson (2021), *Tactics For The Tighrope: Creative Resilience for Creative Communities* <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tactics-for-the-Tighrope-Mark-Robinson-Future-Arts-Centres.pdf>
- 12 More in Common (2022), *Navigating Uncertainty*, <https://www.moreincommon.com/navigatinguncertainty/>

About Common Vision

Common Vision is a think tank specialising in community listening, deliberative dialogue and public imagination. Our work joins the dots between emerging social and economic trends, shares learning from best practice, and identifies pathways to achieving common goals. We do this through a blend of qualitative research, deliberative events and creative engagement, sharing learning, insights and stories with public leaders, funders and others who can implement change in their personal or professional communities.

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