

ANNUAL INVESTMENT SURVEY FINDINGS: 2025/26

HEADLINE FINDINGS

1. Financial sustainability is weakening.

Across the constant sample of 97 organisations, income increased by 10.9% over three years, but expenditure rose by 14.9%, moving the sector from a £1.89 million surplus to a £213,000 deficit. These figures exclude inflation.

2. Earned income is strengthening but cannot replace public subsidy.

Earned income rose by 17%, led by a 17.9% increase in box-office income. However, greater dependence on ticket sales risks making access increasingly influenced by audiences' ability to pay.

3. Public and contributed income remain under pressure.

Public funding increased by only 5.5% over three years and fell by 4.1% in 2025/26. Trust and foundation income, donations and sponsorship also declined, although local-authority and European income increased.

4. Fixed organisational costs are rising rapidly.

Core expenditure increased by 18%, compared with an 11.2% increase in programme expenditure. Salaries accounted for around 70% of core costs, while maintenance and security costs increased by 75.2%.

5. Organisations have protected expenditure on artists.

Artists' costs increased by 22.1% to £18.08 million and represented approximately 62% of programme expenditure.

6. The workforce remains highly precarious and volatile.

Only 18.4% of the workforce were permanent employees. Small and medium-sized organisations were particularly dependent on contractual and freelance workers and therefore more exposed to funding fluctuations. The labour market is characterised by short-term contracts and a project-based labour market.

7. More activity is not translating into greater engagement.

Performances increased by 20% and participatory activities by 46%, but overall audience and participant numbers declined; participation fell by 19%. This may indicate smaller audiences, reduced frequency of attendance or changes in provision.

8. Disability access remains inconsistent.

Reported physical access measures were comparatively well established, but captioning, audio description, sign-language interpretation and Braille were routinely available in only 3% of organisations.

9. Geographic reach is extensive but uneven.

59% of activities took place outside Belfast LGD. Although 76% of organisations delivered some rural activity, rural areas represented only 16% of locations visited.

10. Community infrastructure and cross-border relationships are strategically important to funded organisations.

Schools and community centres provided the broadest geographic reach, accounting for 44% of locations. The Republic of Ireland was the principal external market, representing 72% of outbound activity. Funded organisations hosted more external activity than they delivered outside Northern Ireland.

WORKFORCE

Although funded organisations reported an overall workforce of almost 5,000 in 2025/26, only 911 (18.4%) were permanent employees. This reflects a workforce reliant on a small, permanent workforce, supported by a much larger pool of artists engaged on short-term contracts to deliver, largely, project-based work.

Based on a constant sample of 97 organisations, the overall workforce level fell by 8% over the three-year period, although the pattern was not consistent year-on-year.

There was a substantial temporary increase in 2024/25, followed by a 38% fall in 2025/26. This reflects a significant short-term expansion rather than sustained workforce growth.

The temporary increase was not confined to any one section of the workforce, with increases evident in both medium and small-scale organisations. By artform, the increase was particularly evident within Music, Literature and Combined Arts.

This variance reflects ongoing workforce volatility, characterised by short-term contracts and a project-based labour market.

Medium scale organisations appear to have been the principal drivers behind the 2024/25 recruitment peak. The workforce more than doubled from 23/24 to 24/25, before falling back in the most recent year. This movement was again associated with part-time contractual workers.

This volatility was not reflected to the same extent amongst large scale organisations which are characterised as having a much more substantial and stable permanent employment base.

Small organisations are particularly dependent on flexible labour. In 2025/26, the 53 small organisations accounted for only 85 permanent workers, compared with 613 contractual/freelance workers.

Their total workforce also moved significantly across the three-year timeframe, almost entirely because of changes in part-time freelance engagement. This suggests that small organisations can generate considerable work but have relatively limited capacity to sustain permanent staffing.

Differences in the characteristics of organisations depending on their size suggests that the impact of underfunding is not evenly distributed across the sector, with small and medium scale organisations particularly vulnerable to limited resources.

The workforce is highly concentrated geographically, particularly in Belfast. In 2025/26, funded organisations based in Belfast LGD accounted for 78% the workforce, compared to 13% in Derry and Strabane LGD and 9% in all other areas.

The balance between contract and permanent employment does vary regionally. Belfast has a particularly higher reliance on contract and freelance workers (83%) compared with 76% in Derry City & Strabane and 75% in all other areas. This is likely to reflect differences in work opportunities across Northern Ireland.

FINANCE

Income

Based on a constant sample, total income increased by 10.9% over the three years, from £59.08m to £65.49m, but total expenditure increased faster, by 14.9%, from £57.20m to £65.71m. Consequently, the sample of 97 organisations moved from an aggregate surplus of approximately £1.89m in 2023/24 to a small deficit of around £213k in 2025/26. These figures are nominal and exclude inflation.

Earned income strengthened, particularly for large scale organisations and was the main source of income growth, overall. Total earned income increased 17.0% over the three years (£25.65m to £30.00m), including a 17.4% increase in 2025/26 alone.

Box-office income was particularly important, rising 17.9% from £13.65m to £16.09m and accounting for more than half of earned income in 2025/26. Most of this growth was concentrated among larger venues, but not exclusively. Bar/catering income also rose 21.0% over three years, pointing to a stronger trading environment and improved capacity to generate income directly from audiences.

Increased box-office income is a positive development, indicating stronger earned-income performance. However, continued public subsidy is essential to maintain affordable and equitable access to the arts, ensuring that participation is not determined solely by an individual's ability to pay.

Public-sector income was comparatively static overall, with significant movement between individual funding sources. Public funding increased by only 5.5% over three years, from £27.32m to £28.83m, and fell by 4.1% in 2025/26.

Local-authority funding moved in the opposite direction, increasing 22.0% to £5.26m, while NI government department income fell 36.0% to £2.54m. European funding increased sharply from £65k to £1.01m, although the data suggests this is highly concentrated on a small number of organisations. The picture is therefore one of a fluid funding mix rather than broad-based growth in public investment.

Contributed income weakened. Total contributed income fell 3.4% over three years to £4.68m, despite some individual streams being more volatile. Trust and foundation income, fell 19.9%, from £3.43m to £2.75m, although the scale of the three-year decline is accentuated by an unusually high level of trust funding in 2023/24.

Donations declined 18.2% and sponsorship by 10.9%.

Expenditure

Core expenditure is rising considerably faster than income, driven principally by staffing and property-related costs. Core expenditure increased 18.0% over three years, from £30.81m to £36.37m, including a 12.6% rise in 2025/26 alone. Salaries are by far the largest component, reaching £25.38m, approximately 70% of core expenditure.

Increasing costs linked to the maintenance and security of organisations is particularly visible, rising 75.2% over three years and 82.9% in 2025/26 to £2.78m. The data indicates that this increase is influenced significantly by some individual movements linked to our larger venues.

The overall pattern indicates growing pressure from the fixed costs required simply to maintain organisational capacity and infrastructure.

Programme expenditure has grown more moderately, but spending on artists has been protected and increased. Total programme expenditure rose 11.2% over three years, from £26.38m to £29.34m, compared with the 18.0% increase in core costs. Within this, artists' costs increased 22.1% to £18.08m, and now account for approximately 62% of all programme expenditure.

Marketing expenditure also rose 9.2%, while several other programme costs were flat or lower over the period – venue costs fell 13.8%, equipment/materials were broadly unchanged and travel/accommodation fell slightly. This suggests organisations have

prioritised expenditure directly associated with artists while containing other programme costs, even as their underlying organisational costs have risen.

ACTIVITY

Over the past 3 years, organisations in our constant sample have increased their activity, with the number performances up by 20% and participatory activities by 46%. At the same time, overall audience and participant numbers decreased. This growth in activity has been delivered alongside rising costs, flat public funding in real terms and a deficit position for the whole sample in 25/26.

Although not directly comparable, audience engagement figures in England paint a similar picture ([Main report for the Participation Survey \(April 2024 to March 2025\) - GOV.UK](#)), suggesting that earlier post-pandemic recovery may have reached a ceiling due to more constrained household spending and audiences attending less frequently.

A similar pattern can be seen in participation-based activity. Despite strong growth in the number of activities delivered, levels of participation did not keep pace with this expansion, declining over the last three years by 19%. Estimated counts remain more volatile.

Attendance at exhibitions shows a stronger longer-term trend, with a 40% increase in visitors over the three-year timeframe.

Activity targeted at specific groups

Data shows a stable pattern of targeted activity, with some slight rebalancing of priorities between years.

Deprived neighborhoods and young people remain dominant priorities for the portfolio. In 2025/26, an average of 43% of activity targeted deprived neighborhoods and 42% targeted children and young people (5 to 24-year-olds). There was little change in these priorities over the three-year timeframe.

There were more evident shifts in priorities towards older people, ethnic minorities and environmental themes. Early-years provision remains a relatively low priority, falling from 14% to 12% over three years. Health and wellbeing fell by 5 percentage points over the same period.

Sector engagement

Engagement is strongest with organisations closest to the arts sector. Almost all organisations worked with other arts organisations (98%), while substantial proportions engaged with local authorities (90%), education (85%) and community groups (83%). This demonstrates a well-developed network of cultural, civic and community partnerships within the funded portfolio of organisations.

64% of funded organisations worked with the health and wellbeing sector. A sector priority for the Arts Council given the Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme it operates with National Lottery funding.

Fewer organisations engaged with regeneration (38%), climate change (37%), libraries (33%) or criminal justice (18%). These areas may offer scope for further cross-sector development.

Access provision

Physical access is considerably more embedded than communication or sensory access. Accessible toilets were available across all activity in 57% of organisations, wheelchair access in 52% and accessible signage in 50%.

By comparison, captioning, audio description, BSL/ISL interpretation and Braille were consistently available in no more than 2%–3% of organisations.

Specialist access is generally provided selectively rather than routinely. Multi-sensory workshops were offered for some activity by 38% of organisations, relaxed performances by 33%, captioning by 29% and dementia-friendly performances by 26%. This indicates that provision exists but is often event-specific rather than embedded within programmes.

Outbound activity

The Republic of Ireland is by far the primary external market for organisations based in Northern Ireland. Based on activity in 2025/26, it accounted for 531 of 741 recorded activities outside Northern Ireland (72% of the total), compared with 15% in Great Britain and 9% in the EU/EEA. Overall, 87% of external activity took place in Ireland or Great Britain.

Outbound engagement is principally delivery focused. Stand-alone activities accounted for 321 movements and work arranged for Northern Ireland creative practitioners for 264. Formal touring and co-production were much less common, suggesting that international activity is dominated by individual engagements and discrete projects rather than sustained tours.

Inbound activity

Northern Ireland hosted more external activity than its organisations delivered elsewhere. There were 1,071 recorded incoming activities compared with 741 outbound activities. Hosting creative practitioners was the largest category, accounting for 496 instances, or 46% of all inbound activity.

Inbound activity was more geographically diverse, although Ireland and Great Britain remained dominant. Ireland accounted for 44% and Great Britain for 34% of hosted

activity. A further 11% came from the EU/EEA, with smaller but visible contributions from North America, the Middle East/North Africa and other global regions.

Box-office income

Data described here relates to 6 organisations with established ticketing systems: The Playhouse, Grand Opera House, Derry Theatre Trust, Lyric, MAC, Ulster Orchestra. Data from these organisations is used as transactions are recorded systematically as is therefore more reliable.

Ticket yield returned to a more typical level in 2025/26 following an exceptional 2024/25. Average ticket yield was £21.24 in 2025/26, compared with £23.77 in 2023/24 and the unusually high £29.50 in 2024/25.

Provision for carers and support workers has increased substantially over the past three years, suggesting improved accessibility when booking and attending performances.

Carer/support-worker tickets increased from 4,826 in 2023/24 to 10,745 in 2025/26 – an increase of 123%. They represented 10.4% of all concessionary/discounted tickets in 2025/26, compared with 5.3% in 2023/24. This suggests a sustained increase in the use or recording of companion/carers ticket provision.

GEOGRAPHY

59% of activity took place outside Belfast LGD.

The frequency of activity varied considerably between LGDs. Average provision ranged from 5.0 activities per location in Antrim and Newtownabbey and Mid and East Antrim to 32.8 in Mid Ulster. This reflects a range of factors including type of activity, number of venues, and levels of demand.

Most activity took place in urban areas. Urban locations accounted for 84% of locations and 79% of activities. This reflects the concentration of population, organisations and cultural infrastructure in urban settlements.

Rural locations received an average of 15.9 activities, compared with 11.9 at urban locations. The rural average was therefore around 34% higher, suggesting a higher return rate.

Rural activity had substantial organisational reach but was concentrated across fewer locations. Sixty-eight of the 90 organisations (76%) delivered activity in rural areas, demonstrating broad engagement with rural communities. However, rural areas represented only 16% of all locations visited.

Activity was concentrated in more deprived communities. The three most deprived deciles accounted for 56% of locations and 61% of all activities delivered. The most

deprived decile alone received 42,844 activities (39% of the total) and was reached by 84 of the 90 organisations.

Delivery intensity did not follow a consistent deprivation gradient. The average ranged from 4.0 activities per location in Decile 7 to 23.8 in Decile 5. This suggests that frequency at individual locations is influenced by factors such as nature of activity, established partnerships and venue type, rather than deprivation alone.

Some large venues are also located in high areas of deprivation, potentially skewing activity towards these areas not because of an intention to engage deprived communities but because they are located there.

Belfast-based clients delivered predominantly within Belfast but also demonstrated regional reach. Belfast accounted for 66% of locations and 74% of activities. However, 34% of locations and 26% of activities were outside the district, showing that these organisations contributed to provision across Northern Ireland.

Twenty-nine organisations (49%) delivered activity across 324 locations in Derry and Strabane, the largest number of locations in any district outside Belfast.

Schools and community centres provide the broadest geographical reach. Together, they accounted for 3,818 locations, or 44% of all locations visited, and hosted 33,273 activities, a combined total, more than arts venues. This highlights the importance of the education and community infrastructure in delivering arts provision beyond dedicated cultural venues.

Arts venues supported the most intensive delivery. Arts venues hosted 31,455 activities (29% of all activity) across 816 locations, averaging 38.5 activities per location. This was the highest average among the listed venue types and indicates sustained or recurring programming at dedicated arts facilities.

Drama had the most geographically diverse international touring profile. Of its 172 activities, 148 took place outside the Republic of Ireland, including 61 in North America, 44 in Great Britain and 43 in the EU/EEA. This contrasts with literature, dance and most combined-arts activity, which were concentrated in the Republic of Ireland.

Thirty-four of the 40 organisations delivering activity outside Northern Ireland worked in the Republic of Ireland, delivering 2,796 activities, 91% of all reported activity. By comparison, Great Britain, the EU/EEA, North America and other global regions collectively accounted for only 278 activities (9% of activity).