

Annual Report

2025



Portsmouth
Creates

Portsmouth Creates CLC

Trustees, Executive Team and Supporting Partners

Trustees

Bernie Topham (Chair)
Drusilla Moody (Vice Chair)
Steve Futter (Treasurer)
Terri Ralls (Resigned 10/04/25)
Pippa Bostock
Cameron Locke
Sarah Duckering (Resigned 07/04/25)
Orla Crean
Paul Gonella (Resigned 21/02/25)
Sasha Biloshisky
Clare Budden
Matthew Ponsford
Paul Gorst
Lynne Dick
Jonathan Folkard

Executive Team

Gemma Nichols (CEO)
Erica Smith (Interim
Executive Director)
Billie Coe (Programme Manager)
Nikki Jones (Office Manager)
Lucy-Jane Fitzpatrick (Marketing
& Communications Manager)
Jane Hodgkin (Project Officer)

Founding Partners

Arts Council England
Victorious Festival
University of Portsmouth
Portsmouth City Council

Registered Office: Create at Playland, 1-6 City Buildings, Commercial Road, Portsmouth, PO1 4BD
Company Registration Number (England & Wales): 12367811

Website: www.portsmouthcreates.co.uk

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Foreword

We have taken some time to truly reflect on Portsmouth Creates and 2025. It has been a year of immense growth, and this year's annual report marks the start of a significant step change for Portsmouth Creates.

We have been fortunate to support so many local and regional creatives, individuals, and organisations to either establish themselves at the beginning of their journey or support them with new chapters or hurdles on their way. We are proud to reflect that we have become the go-to organisation, the catalyst to get things moving, and the place to help support and incubate ideas.

There has been a real buzz within Portsmouth's creative and cultural community, and that's because there is a new palpable energy within the local cultural scene – driven by strengthened partnerships and collaborative efforts that are propelling the city's creative landscape forward.

Remaining steadfast in our vision, 2025 saw us rise to the challenge with many accomplishments, including celebrating a year of In Our Words, hosting an unforgettable We Connect conference highlighting inclusivity in the arts, and the launch of We Thrive, to mention just a few.

**The Portsmouth Creates team may be small,
but we are a mighty team who remain enthusiastic
about possibility.**

We thank our founding partners who have collaborated with us to achieve so many successes, and we appreciate their significant support.

The story continues, and the impact shines through. Please enjoy our reflections of the year.

Bernie Topham

Chair of Portsmouth Creates



Introduction

It hardly seems possible that we are already in the second year of delivering our Place Partnership for Arts Council England. Time really does fly, and when I look back on everything that has been achieved over the past year, I am incredibly proud of the progress we have made together.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this work continues to be the opportunity to listen, learn and collaborate with the people and organisations that make Portsmouth's cultural and creative sector so vibrant. We have spent the year engaging with artists, cultural organisations, community groups and partners, taking the time to understand both the challenges they face and the opportunities they see for the future. These conversations are at the heart of our work and help ensure that our programmes and projects respond to genuine need while unlocking new possibilities for growth and development.

As a small but mighty team, we are often asked how we manage to deliver such a wide range of activity. The answer is simple:

We are passionate about what we do, committed to the city we serve, and determined to make a difference by working in partnership in all that we do.

Every initiative we undertake is driven by a desire to create lasting impact – not only economically through investment, jobs and opportunities, but socially, by bringing people together, strengthening communities, and improving quality of life through creativity.

The challenges facing the cultural and creative sector remain significant, but so too is the resilience and ambition that exists across Portsmouth and beyond. It is a privilege to play a part in supporting that ambition and helping to create the conditions for culture to thrive.



As you read this report, we hope you will see not only the achievements of the past year but also the strength of the partnerships that make this work possible.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed their time, expertise, and enthusiasm. Together, we are building a stronger, more connected, and more creative future for Portsmouth, and I am excited about what the next year will bring.

Gemma Nichols

CEO

Strategic

Objectives

We have based our work over the last three years on three pillars:



People



Community



Place

Focusing on the three pillars of **People**, **Community**, and **Place** is essential because they form the foundation for sustainable and meaningful development. People are at the heart of our initiative, ensuring that efforts meet real needs and create growth. Community creates collective well-being, collaboration, and social cohesion, which strengthens resilience and shared identity. Place provides the physical and cultural environment that supports these interactions and growth, creating a sense of belonging and stability. Together, these pillars promote progress that benefits individuals and our society.

Our strategy has been informed through meaningful consultation with stakeholders across the creative sector.

By engaging artists, cultural organisations, industry leaders, and emerging voices, we ensured that the direction we set reflects both the needs and desires of those at the heart of creative innovation. Their insights have been instrumental in building a strategy that is collaborative, responsive, and positioned to support sustainable growth across the sector.

Driving growth, talent, and inclusion for creatives and communities through co-creation, building capacity, and pathways.

Nurturing talent via business support, shared learning, and developing new commissioning opportunities.

Creating access for young people via a mentoring and apprentice program developing cultural leaders of the future. Platforming youth voice to be heard via a youth board.

Identifying gaps of provision and facilitating a solution-based ecosystem of creators via creative hubs in locations of need across the city.

Impacts will be multifaceted, building the foundations for a confident sector via a nurturing environment for talent to flourish, and igniting a platform for community engagement, resulting in a diverse, sustainable landscape that enriches our cultural fabric.

Portsmouth Creates

At A Glance

At the heart of everything we do is a commitment to the people and communities of Portsmouth. We believe that creativity thrives when it is rooted in real lives, shared experiences, and the unique character of our city. By focusing on people, we amplify local voices; by investing in community, we build belonging and collaboration; and by celebrating place, we honour unique Portsmouth's identity, heritage, and future potential.

We worked with over

120

volunteers

We supported

36

creative businesses to
generate income at our

We Create markets

We supported over

£664,483

of funding applications

We provided
opportunities for

52

local creative students
to exhibit and sell their
products at our

We Create markets

We delivered

61

business support events,
mentoring, and coaching sessions

We provided over

178 hours of face-to-face
business support advice

We have supported

167
creatives to platform on our
Creative Directory

We delivered
creative events
across

12
wards of the city

We partnered and
engaged with

52
schools and colleges

We welcomed over

680
creative small
businesses, freelancers,
and organisations to
our business support
events programme

In Our Words saw

150+
events held in 2025

We supported

12 local artists to retail and showcase their
work at our Curating Spaces programme



A large crowd of people, mostly young adults, is gathered in an outdoor setting, possibly a stadium or arena. In the foreground, a person is dressed as a large, blue, furry mascot wearing a white graduation cap and gown. The mascot has a crest on its chest that reads "UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH". The crowd in the background is diverse and appears to be at a celebratory event. The image has a halftone or dithered texture.

Pillar 1:

People

We recognise ideas, explore possibilities, and champion Portsmouth's creativity – not just in all shapes and sizes, but at all stages of development.



In Our Words

2025 saw the successful launch of our year-long literary programme, In Our Words. In Our Words was created to address the low literacy levels in the city, which are suggested to be among the lowest in the country. Running from World Book Day 2025 to World Book Day 2026, the aim of In Our Words is simple: to increase engagement in reading across the city through a variety of programmed events hosted by Portsmouth's creatives and communities.

Portsmouth has a strong literary heritage that is an under-celebrated resource in the city. As the birthplace of literary great Charles Dickens and the home of Sherlock Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the city's literary heritage is built on the shoulders of these icons.

The response from the city has been incredible. **More than 30 creatives signed up to host events across the city**, representing a wide range of art forms, with many hosting multiple events in a series. Activities have ranged from walking tours, puppetry in pubs, writing workshops, poetry slams, author panels, reading groups, and much more.

In Our Words began at Fratton Park with a launch event designed to kick-off the celebrations in style. Schools from across the city were invited to participate in the event, and we were blown away by their enthusiasm. **Over 350 students attended the launch at Fratton Park** to hear Sunday Times bestselling author Dan Freedman speak about his route to writing, inspiring the students to pick up a book this year and discover the joy of reading.

The variety of events across the programme to date has been both deliberate and incredible. While many people assume reading, storytelling, or literature is not for

them and are only available in the form of the written word, In Our Words has challenged that belief. The stretch of events has celebrated storytelling in all of its forms. Matt Stevens tells us about Word of Mouth's street sessions and their success of multi-lingual storytelling:

"Word of Mouth's 'Street Sessions' provides multilingual, independent artists from Portsmouth with performance opportunities. While showcasing the diverse cultural heritage which already thrives throughout our city. Our collaboration with emerging local artists revealed exceptional talent which normally remains unseen while demonstrating that outstanding musical ability exists throughout various cultural backgrounds within our community.

Each track was recorded live in outdoor locations across Portsmouth, then professionally edited, mixed, and mastered. Every song carries its own flow, with personal stories, feelings, and a beautiful mix of languages – from Italian and Spanish to Luganda and more. In total, we created over 15 multilingual performance videos, all of which will be shared on the @WordofMouthWorld YouTube channel so that the project can reach even wider communities beyond the live recordings.

The funding enabled Street Sessions to use musical storytelling as a tool for community unity while showcasing Portsmouth's diverse multicultural population and demonstrating that artistic talent resides throughout the entire city.

The support we received has not only amplified these artists, but it has also helped build pride, representation, and a sense of belonging for the communities they come from."

In Our Words will culminate in a spectacular Guinness World Record attempt at the largest reading lesson across multiple locations. Fratton Park will host schools from across the city in an attempt to break the record for the city. The year will also see the remaining sixty plus events hosted, including Portsmouth's own literary festival BookFest, literary exhibitions, author panels, and many more events. The National Literacy Trust has also announced 2026 as The National Year of Reading, and we are excited to be playing a part in literary history.



2025 Event Stats



Over
150
events
in 2025
alone



More than
60
more
planned
for 2026



1000s
of participants
across all age
groups



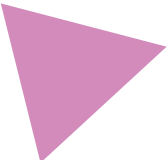
Events in
12 of
14 wards

online, city-wide events

Business

Support

Activity



The creative and cultural industries play a crucial role in driving innovation, economic growth, and cultural enrichment. Through our business support programme dedicated to these industries, it is essential that we nurture talent, strengthen creative enterprises, and ensure long-term sustainability. The impact of our programmes extends far beyond the individual businesses that it supports, which in turn influences the broader economy and enriches the social fabric of Portsmouth's communities.



From an economic perspective, creative industries are powerful drivers of growth. They contribute significantly to local and national economies by generating employment, attracting investment, and boosting tourism. Business support programmes provide creative entrepreneurs and enterprises with access to critical resources such as funding, training, mentorship, and networking opportunities. These initiatives empower creatives to develop sustainable business models, scale their operations, and build resilience against market challenges. As a result, supported businesses become better equipped to innovate, increase productivity, and contribute to a diverse economic landscape.

Additionally, the creative industries frequently overlap with other sectors, producing ripple effects that boost broader economic activity. Through enabling collaboration across different fields, these initiatives inspire new ideas, products, and services, thereby increasing the region's global competitiveness.

The social impact of supporting creative industries is equally profound. Creativity has the power to connect people, celebrate cultural diversity, and build a sense of identity and belonging. Business support programmes

that empower creatives directly enrich communities by providing platforms for artistic expression, storytelling, and shared experiences. This not only strengthens social cohesion but also ensures diverse voices are represented and celebrated.

Moreover, these programmes create accessible pathways for under-represented groups to enter and thrive within the creative industries, promoting inclusivity and equity. By investing in creative talent, we pave the way for the next generation of artists, performers, and innovators to flourish, resulting in a vibrant and dynamic cultural landscape.

In summary, a business support programme for the creative industries is a catalyst for economic vitality and social enrichment. It empowers creative individuals and enterprises to unlock their potential, driving innovation, economic prosperity, and cultural vibrancy. As the creative sector continues to grow and evolve, sustained support is essential to ensuring its continued contribution to both the economy and society at large.

Throughout 2025, we have actively worked with partners across the city to support the overall development and growth of the creative sector. Through our Place

Partnership programme, we have worked with Portsmouth City Council, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth Business Support Programme, Shaping Portsmouth, Federation of Small Businesses, and Hampshire Chamber of Commerce to facilitate and deliver a programme of activity that has actively benefitted the sector.



Business

Support

Activity



**Business Reach
& Participation**

680

BUSINESSES
DIRECTLY ENGAGED

10

MENTORING
AND COACHING
SESSIONS DELIVERED

**178
hours**

OF 1:1 BUSINESS
SUPPORT ADVICE GIVEN

TYPES OF BUSINESSES;
CREATIVE FREELANCERS,
SOLE TRADERS, CIC'S,
CIOS, SMES AND
MICRO-CREATIVES

Capacity Building

826

ATTENDEES TO VARIOUS
WORKSHOPS. TRAINING
SESSIONS, ADVICE SURGERIES,
WE CONNECT NETWORKING
EVENTS

680

ATTENDANCES OF EVENTS
INCLUDING THE
WE CONNECT CONFERENCE

Portsmouth Creative Directory Outcomes

IN 2025 WE SAW:

96

CREATIVES
SIGNING UP

167

LIVE
ACCOUNTS

9

DIFFERENT
ART FORM
CATEGORIES

SPREAD
ACROSS

15

POSTCODES

Funding & Resources

108

BUSINESSES RECEIVING
FUNDING SUPPORT
AND GUIDANCE

£51,300

VALUE OF SUPPORT IN KIND PROVIDED, ADDING
CAPACITY AND RESOURCE TO WIDER CULTURAL
DELIVERY

£664,483

INCOME GENERATION ACROSS BUSINESS
THROUGH 1:1 ADVICE, MATCH FUNDS AND
COMMISSIONING

Impact & Outcomes

294

NUMBER OF NEW JOBS
CREATED IN AND ACROSS
THE CREATIVE SECTOR

Long-Term Engagement

10

VIA WE THRIVE, ONGOING
MENTORSHIP AND SUPPORT
PROGRAMMES



CASE STUDY

Clarke Reynolds

Braille Artist • Children's Author • Disability Advocate

Who is Clarke Reynolds?

Clarke Reynolds grew up on a council estate in Portsmouth, navigating a childhood marked by limited resources and a difficult home life. From an early age, art was his anchor – a quiet constant that no circumstance could take away.

At six years old, Clarke lost the sight in his right eye. Years later, in his early thirties, he was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa – a progressive inherited condition that causes tunnel vision and gradual sight loss. Today, Clarke retains only 5% vision. He describes the experience with characteristic poetry: **“It’s like looking underwater; you see shapes and shadows and glimpses of colour.”** He also describes it as looking through a thousand dots. Those dots would go on to define his art.

Rather than mourning what sight loss took from him, Clarke reimagined what it could give. He transformed the dots of the Braille alphabet – a system of communication for the blind – into vibrant, tactile works of art. His canvases combine colour, pattern, and raised texture so that both blind and sighted audiences can engage with them on different sensory levels. For Clarke, Braille is a language, not a limitation, and he speaks it beautifully.



“Blindness didn’t take my art away; it gave me a new way to share it.”
Clarke Reynolds

Facing the Odds

Clarke's journey has not been without setbacks. 2025 was a particularly difficult year, filled with the kinds of blows that might have stopped many artists in their tracks.

They did not stop Clarke. Instead, he channelled these experiences into momentum. In the same year he was dropped by his gallery, he staged a celebrated solo show – 'Mr Dot Day' – at Box Castle Road before the venue closed. He also self-published "Mr Dot and His Magical White Cane Adventures," a Braille picture book for children – a first-of-its-kind creative achievement that he made happen independently, against the odds.

This resilience is not incidental to Clarke's story. It is the story. His art is an act of defiance and an act of generosity – a gift to a world that has not always made space for him.

Achievements

Art & Exhibition

- Solo exhibition 'Mr Dot Day' at Box Castle Road, Portsmouth (2025)
- Work exhibited in galleries across the UK and internationally
- Featured in a Channel 4 / Tesco national television advertisement
- Developing Braille as a recognised contemporary art form accessible to all

Literature

- Self-published "Mr Dot and His Magical White Cane Adventures" – a Braille children's picture book
- Pioneering inclusive storytelling for visually impaired children

Sport & Advocacy

- Completed the Brighton Marathon (2025) with only 5% vision, guided remotely in real time by volunteers using Meta smart glasses and the Be My Eyes app – a world first
- Previously completed the London Marathon with a guide runner
- Raised funds for Fight for Sight, the vision research charity, for which he serves as

Ambassador

- Patron of VICTA, supporting children and young people with visual impairments

Recognition

- Finalist, National Diversity Awards
- Regular contributor to podcasts, media interviews, and public speaking engagements
- Engaged with schools and organisations nationwide through workshops and talks



“

This is for all the visually impaired people out there – to push the boundaries of what society tells us we can and cannot do.

– **Clarke Reynolds,**
Brighton Marathon
2025

”

What's Next: 2026 and Beyond

Clarke enters 2026 with the strongest platform of his career. He now has an agent who shares his vision and is actively pursuing brand partnerships to bring Braille into mainstream consciousness. His ambition is not to make Braille art a niche interest but to make it part of everyday life.

Key milestones ahead include:

- Launch of 'Mr Dot DOT Shop' – his first Arts Council-funded project, built on six years of relationship-building and collaboration with fellow creatives, makers, and practitioners
- Invitation to the Venice Biennale in September 2026 – making Clarke the first blind fellow to attend this prestigious international arts event
- Continued brand collaborations focused on inclusive design and accessible communication
- Expanding his Braille art practice into public spaces and new material formats

The Role of Portsmouth Creates

Portsmouth is a city that punches above its creative weight. As Clarke observes, it is a genuine “creative melting pot” – yet its geography means it is too often overlooked, known more for its naval history than its living arts scene. Portsmouth Creates has worked to change that, providing the infrastructure, belief, and direct business support that artists like Clarke need to grow.

For Clarke, Portsmouth Creates has been more than an organisation. It has been a belief system in action. At a time when he had faced professional betrayal and financial loss, Portsmouth Creates looked at his work and saw what it could become. Their direct business support gave Clarke the tools and confidence to pursue major Arts Council funding – something he describes as pivotal to his development as a professional artist and designer.



“You know the saying – too many cooks in the kitchen? Well, Portsmouth has the right cook.”

— **Clarke Reynolds on Portsmouth Creates**

That support has had a measurable impact. Clarke now has Arts Council funding, an agent, an international exhibition invitation, and a television presence. He is, in his own words, finding **“new-found confidence built from opportunity.”**

This is what well-placed creative support looks like in practice: not dependency, but launchpad. Portsmouth Creates did not make Clarke’s career – Clarke did that. But they gave him the stability and belief to do it.

Why Clarke’s Work Matters

Clarke Reynolds is not simply an artist who happens to be blind. He is a practitioner whose work fundamentally challenges how we think about art, access, and communication. His Braille

canvases invite everyone – blind and sighted alike – to experience art differently. His children’s book opens doors for young people with visual impairments who rarely see themselves reflected in culture. His marathon run demonstrated, on a public stage, that disability is not the end of ambition.

He is also, crucially, someone whose influence reaches beyond the arts. Through school visits, public talks, technology partnerships, and media appearances, Clarke is reshaping public understanding of what blind people can do, create, and lead.

Continued investment in Clarke’s work is an investment in a more inclusive, more imaginative, and more accessible cultural landscape – one that Portsmouth Creates has already helped to build, and one that the Arts Council has the opportunity to sustain.





CASE STUDY

Maria Mullis

LOTSOLOVE



Background

Maria Mullis is a Portsmouth-born artist whose work is deeply rooted in the city's coastal identity and maritime heritage. Through her creative brand LOTSOLOVE – named to reflect the principle that every piece is made with 'lots of love' – she produces distinctive handmade artworks that combine storytelling, craftsmanship, and a strong sense of place.

A Unique Narrative

With over 30 years of artistic experience, Maria reinterprets traditional nautical tattoo imagery, such as swallows, anchors, and compasses, transforming historically symbolic motifs into vibrant, contemporary pieces through the use of colour, glitter, and textured forms. Her work explores themes of journey, resilience, and belonging, bringing historic narratives into a modern, accessible context.

Opening Doors

Operating from an apartment studio in Southsea, LOTSOLOVE reflects both entrepreneurial resilience and community-centred creativity. Maria's participation in Portsmouth Creates' **We Create Market** provided her with the opportunity to deepen her engagement with the organisation's business support and networking programmes.

Business Development and Support

Through Portsmouth Creates, Maria has strengthened both her professional practice and confidence. Participation in **We Connect** networking events enabled her to:

- Increase confidence in promoting her work and engaging with new audiences
- Develop digital marketing skills across platforms including Instagram and LinkedIn
- Build relationships with fellow creatives, leading to collaboration opportunities

These connections have supported the growth of LOTSOLOVE beyond the studio, embedding Maria within a wider creative network.

Opportunities and Impact

Maria's inclusion in the Curating Spaces programme at Southsea Library provided a high-profile platform to showcase her work. This opportunity resulted in:

- Direct artwork sales and commissioned pieces
- Increased visibility and audience engagement
- New opportunities with local partners, including Portsmouth News, Southsea Community Cinema and Arts Centre, and Portsmouth Open Studios Events (POSE)

Her exhibition contributed to a vibrant public cultural offer, demonstrating how accessible civic spaces can effectively support creative careers.

Future Development

LOTSOLOVE continues to build momentum, supported by:

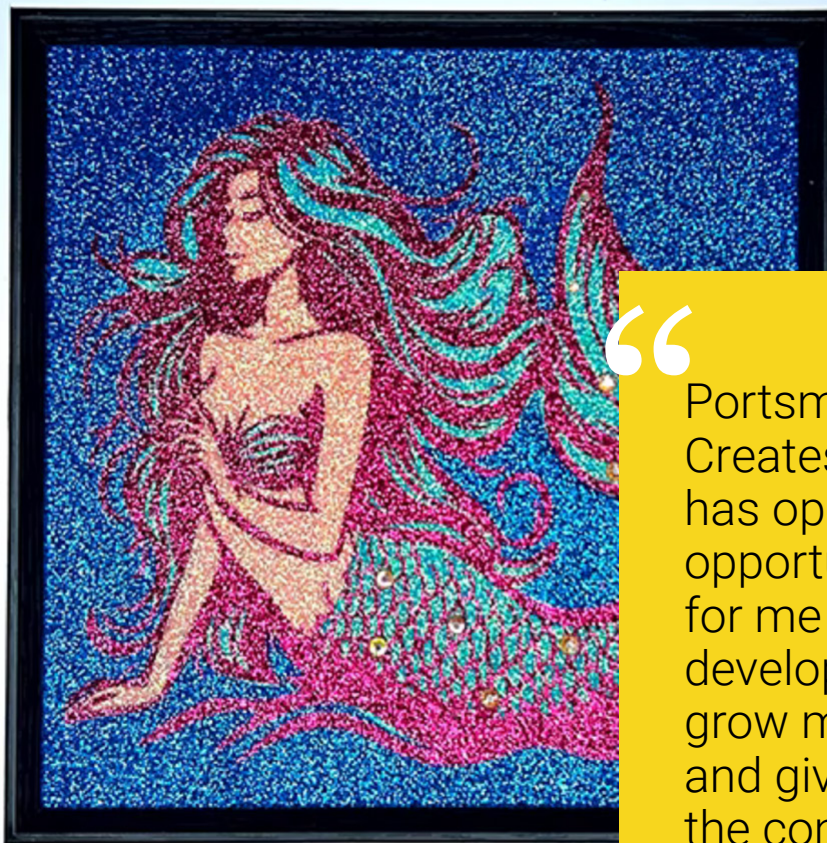
- Inclusion in the Portsmouth Creates Directory
- Ongoing collaborations and project development
- Opportunities to showcase work at city-wide events, including the **Victorious We Create Market**

Conclusion

Maria's journey illustrates the impact of sustained creative support, networking, and skills development. By combining practical guidance with the development of essential skills, Portsmouth Creates helps translate creative potential into sustainable practice.

By investing in both artistic and professional development, the programme strengthens the wider creative community and supports long-term sector resilience.





“

Portsmouth Creates has opened opportunities for me to develop and grow my brand, and given me the confidence to expand my portfolio and reach new audiences.

– Maria Mullins

”

Portsmouth

Creative

Directory

Community and collaboration are key components of Portsmouth Creates delivery. The Creative Directory, launched in January 2024, is a shining example of that, providing a free, online platform dedicated to the city's creatives, which allows them to showcase and promote themselves. Users can browse by art form or creative as desired.

2025 proved another great success for the directory with nearly one hundred new user accounts created and over fifty new published pages. Requests were made across a number of user accounts, too. We're delighted that our creatives are spread throughout the city of Portsmouth, covering every postcode.

In 2026, we're planning to continue this hard work by improving user experience and striving for even more live accounts!



Outcomes:

167

live accounts

9

different
artform categories

96

new accounts
created

Spread across

15

Postcodes



by Portsmouth Creates

**Portsmouth
Creative
Directory**

Sector Specifics

We have actively played a role across the following sector specific forums and development groups:

Portsmouth Cultural Collective

Solent Cultural Forum

Solent Growth Partnership Business Board

Portsmouth Visual Arts Network

Portsmouth Health & Wellbeing Board

Portsmouth Cultural Education Partnership

Portsmouth Seafront Development Group

Portsmouth Music Sector Growth Working Group

Solent Regional Film Office Development



Mentoring

Mentoring plays a crucial role in shaping the success and growth of businesses and individuals, offering guidance, wisdom, and support that extend far beyond day-to-day operations. In the dynamic and often unpredictable creative sector, mentorship creates a bridge between experience and ambition, providing individuals and organisations with the tools to navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and build meaningful connections.

Whether it's through one-on-one coaching, peer-to-peer networking, or organisational mentorship programmes, the insights and encouragement gained from seasoned professionals empower mentees to make informed decisions, develop essential skills, and cultivate the confidence needed to thrive. Beyond personal development, mentoring creates a culture of collaboration and innovation, strengthening the broader creative community by promoting knowledge-sharing and creating pathways for sustainable growth. In essence, mentorship serves as a catalyst for transformation, helping those not only to survive but flourish in an ever-changing landscape.

Some of our Mentors



Left to Right: Craig Patterson, (Portsmouth Guildhall). Jeff Powell, (Big Hug Music) and Hannah Murray (Seed Wellbeing UK).



CASE STUDY

Elysia Sheridan

We Thrive Background • Building Skills & Confidence



Background - Building Skills & Confidence

We Thrive is a tailored support programme designed around artists' individual needs, pairing them with mentors who can help refine their craft, grow their audience, and take their next creative steps with confidence. Elysia came to the programme with the aspiration to become a full-time gigging musician while developing her own style and brand.

Through her mentorship with Jeff Powell from Big Hug Management and Craig Patterson from the Guildhall Trust, Elysia has significantly developed her technical knowledge and confidence in live sound setup. Both mentors provided clear, expert guidance on configuring not only her own equipment but also full live band setups. This broader understanding has been instrumental in helping Elysia recognise the importance of mastering the entire performance process, rather than simply focusing on her individual role.

“

I think it's important as an artist to be able to understand the entire process rather than just plugging in a microphone or showing up. It's dedication to the journey, and if anything goes wrong or you're worried about the sound, having the knowledge to fix it yourself is key.

– Elysia Sheridan

”



Elysia with her Mentors Jeff and Craig

Elysia now approaches her work with a deeper sense of ownership and preparedness. She understands that technical self-sufficiency is a vital part of her development as an artist, enabling her to troubleshoot issues independently and ensure sound quality meets her standards. This knowledge has strengthened both her confidence and professionalism when preparing for live performances.

Creative Development & Career Progression

Elysia has been working on a collection of original tracks with Jeff Powell from Big Hug Music Management, who has played a key role in refining her artistic direction. Through this collaboration, she has been supported in identifying her strongest material and shaping a cohesive brand identity.

Her ambitions include securing recognition through platforms such as BBC Introducing, and she has already begun laying the groundwork by developing a clear visual identity and authentic sound that reflects her artistry. Jeff's guidance has also extended beyond music production, providing valuable insight into the music industry, the importance of networking, and the need to prioritise quality over speed.

She says:

"Jeff has helped me learn a lot about the music industry with networking events and how important it is to take the time on your work and not rush it. Quality is key".

With the combined support of mentorship and programme funding, Elysia has been able to grow creatively with clarity and purpose. She now feels better equipped to progress independently towards establishing a sustainable, full-time career in music.

Opportunities & Future Aspirations

A standout opportunity for Elysia has been collaborating with London-based producer Patch Boswell – an introduction facilitated through the programme. Patch's experience and working for the likes of Simon Cowell (The Next Act), The Traitors UK and Samsung, has brought a new level of depth to Elysia's music, particularly in realising her jazz-infused pop sound. This collaboration has been both creatively fulfilling and aspirational, with Elysia keen to continue working at this level as her career develops.

Alongside studio work, Elysia has gained valuable live performance experience, including appearances on the **Kings Theatre** stage and at local events across Portsmouth. She is particularly looking forward to performing at **Portsmouth Pride**, which represents an exciting platform to connect with wider audiences.

The **We Thrive** programme has significantly helped Elysia build momentum, expand her network, and move closer to her long-term goal of becoming an established artist. Craig Patterson notes:

"Elysia has engaged positively with Portsmouth Guildhall through her involvement in The BASE. We have been pleased to provide access to space, making the most of the opportunities available to develop her creative practice and explore future performance opportunities."

Pillar 2:

Community



We work with, for, and in communities, co-creating across Portsmouth to animate spaces, supporting creative engagement and opportunities.

We Create Market At Victorious

20 local creative traders from Portsmouth and the Greater Portsmouth area traded across the August bank holiday weekend with heavily discounted local pitch prices.



Portsmouth Creates Hub At Victorious Festival 2025



'In Our Words' Literary Themed Free Creative Activity

In partnership with Seekers Create CIC, we creatively engaged with visitors using literary themes to support 'In Our Words' year of literacy. Prompts such as Favourite Book, Favourite Character, Favourite Author, Favourite Lyric, and Write a Message to the Future inspired free creative activity across huge doodle walls.



We Create Christmas Pop-Up Market at Playland December 2025

16 local traders consisting of established, new, and emerging artists traded for a one-day pop-up Christmas market at Playland.

Young Creates Partnership included HSDC and City of Portsmouth College students, providing trading experience to students undertaking art and creative courses and those enrolled in the Creative Enterprise course at HSDC.

Over 21 creative students worked their respective college pitches over the course of the market, showcasing and selling products from 41 students overall.

Young Creates Programme at Victorious

In partnership with HSDC and their Creative Enterprise course, 30 students were provided with space to showcase and sell their products across the festival weekend.

8 students managed the market pitch on-site, from set-up to pack-down, gaining valuable experience at marketing, setting up, and creating an exhibition area for products and sales, customer liaison, packaging, and finance management; all within a free, safe, and supported environment.



We Connect

This year we delivered 12 We Connect events, as part of the We Connect event series. Our We Connect event series is all about connecting local artists, cultural organisations, creatives and community groups with one another to collaborate and build capacity.

In response to our ongoing consultation with the sector, each of our We Connect Networking events are themed to support sector growth.

We Connect

Conference

**Inclusion in the Arts,
in Partnership with
This New Ground.**



We Connect serves as a mechanism for bringing together Portsmouth's creative and cultural sector. Through networking and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange, delegates always have the chance to learn from one another, share experiences, and develop new ideas.





This New Ground

We Connect 2025 Inclusion in the Arts

About We Connect

We Connect is curated and delivered by Portsmouth Creates, and our goal is to build a more confident and resilient sector through community collaboration and engagement.

We Connect for 2025 was delivered in partnership with This New Ground, who are a participatory arts organisation working to elevate the voices and artistic talents of people with a learning disability.

This year's conference was thoughtfully curated to enhance the connections within our creative community, our residents, and the wider communities of Portsmouth. In partnership with This New Ground, it was curated to be a platform for learning, exchange, inspiration and most importantly inclusion to ensure that our creative and cultural sector thrives.



About the Conference

We Connect 2025 – Inclusion in the Arts was a one-day event bringing together inclusive arts practitioners, organisations, and artists from Portsmouth and across the UK. Together, we explored how we can build a more diverse cultural landscape – one where disabled people and people with a learning disability are not only included but leading the way.

The Day

The day was structured into three session blocks. In each block, delegates chose one of three different session formats:

Panel Talks

Listen & Reflect:

We heard from leading voices in inclusive arts as they shared lived experiences and discussed pressing issues such as collaborating with artists with a learning disability, making governance accessible, and the future of access for audiences.

Creative Workshops

Make Together:

Hands-on, disability-led sessions that spotlighted the work of artists who are disabled people or people with a learning disability. These workshops were an opportunity to experience inclusive practice directly through creative processes, including inclusive digital art and mindful, sensory making.

Skill Sharing

Learn by Doing:

Practical sessions designed to give you tools you can use straight away, from diversifying income and international working to inclusive dance leadership.

Who It Was For

The day was open to artists, organisations, trustees, producers, students, and anyone interested in making their practice or institution more inclusive. We particularly welcomed disabled artists, artists with a learning disability, and neurodivergent artists. Participation was flexible: listen, learn, or make. A quiet space for reflection or just peace was available throughout.

The Speakers, Panel and Workshop Leaders

The speakers at this year's conference were carefully curated in partnership with **We are Bap**.

They included:

The Hale

Stopgap Dance

Brigitte Aphrodite

Head Over Wheels

Tim Wheeler

Zoo Co

Access all Areas

Tilly & Del

Lizzie Banks

This New Ground

We Connect Aims:

- **Be Inspired:** Discover new perspectives and ideas that can elevate your creative practice.
- **Collaborate:** Form meaningful learning and partnerships that can lead to innovative inclusive projects and opportunities.
- **Contribute:** Play a vital role in shaping the future of Portsmouth's creative community by sharing your voice and expertise.

We Connect Objectives:

- Raise hopes, aspirations, and ambitions of the cultural and creative sector.
- Champion the need for greater investment across the city.
- Highlight and support opportunities for growth.
- Profile Portsmouth Creates as a collaborate leader that enables and champions growth for greater economic impact.



Our Learnings

This conference was pivotal for Portsmouth Creates for its own development and making all events and projects as accessible and as inclusive as possible.



At the close of the event, participants were invited to reflect on their experience through three short prompts. Their responses – captured here largely in their own words – offer a candid, ground-level view of what the day meant to those who took part, and point clearly to what should be carried forward into future programming.

What is the feeling that you are leaving with?

The emotional tone of the day's feedback was overwhelmingly warm. Participants described feeling welcome, relaxed, and genuinely proud to have taken part. They felt a recurring sense of permission – to be curious, to try something new, and, notably, to fail. Several also named the nervousness they had arrived with, only to leave feeling happy, hopeful and inspired.

Participant feedback

**A real
achievement
to have been
involved.**

**Permission
to fail.**

**Be more
Punk!**

This blend of comfort and challenge – feeling both held and stretched – reflects well on the safety and openness the event succeeded in creating.

What is the moment that stood out?

Standout moments spanned the practical and the profound. Hands-on sessions such as the iPad workshop and the demystifying of board governance were valued for their accessibility, while more reflective moments – such as the constellation game and its accompanying poem, and a much-quoted line about a fish being asked to climb a tree – left a lasting impression on how participants think about inclusion and difference. Lighter touches, including Sausage Bingo and shared food, were remembered just as fondly as the more formal content.

“

I'm going away thinking about paying trustees – especially regarding access and artists.”

– Participant

Something that you have learnt today?

The clearest and most repeated learning point was the distinction between inclusion and involvement – a theme participants returned to again and again as a lens for thinking about access, representation, and governance. Alongside this sat practical takeaways around trustee recruitment and pay, and a broader call to slow down, listen more, and make space for different voices and perspectives.

The reflections point to a genuine shift in perspective for many attendees, particularly around what meaningful access and inclusion look like in practice rather than in policy alone.

“

The importance of understanding the difference between Inclusion and Involvement.

– Participant

”



Lessons Learned

Implications for Future Events

Drawing the three sets of feedback together, several practical lessons emerge for future programming:

Build in more time and space – participants consistently asked to 'go slower' and have room to breathe, reflect, and process.

Treat access as a creative and structural priority, not an afterthought.

Several participants specifically noted that centering access improved rather than constrained the experience.

Carry the inclusion of vs. involvement framing into future planning and evaluation, as it resonated strongly and shifted thinking.

Explore trustee recruitment practices, including the option of paying trustees, particularly to widen access for artists and disabled participants.

Keep – and where possible expand – informal, joyful elements (shared food, games, lighter sessions),

which participants named alongside the more formal learning as highlights of the day.

Continue pairing practical, skills-based sessions (e.g. iPad workshops, governance demystifying) with reflective and creative activities, as both were highly valued.

Review the booking system for workshops, which was flagged directly by participants as an area for improvement.

As an Arts Council England Priority Place, we understand the importance of supporting our sector to drive investment and growth. We hope that as we move forward this flagship, the We Connect event will become an annual opportunity to bring together our creative community, focusing on growth and wider economic impact.



Pillar 3:

Place

We work in collaboration across the city to put Portsmouth on the map for its creativity, our communities, and our collective ambition.



In 2023, Portsmouth Creates was awarded Place Partnership Project grant funding from Arts Council. Place Partnership funding is a strategic place-based intervention that is intended to make a long-term difference to the cultural and/or creative life of the local community, and makes a clear step change in provision in that place. It is informed by robust needs analysis and responds to local strategies, led by a consortium of partners who are relevant to delivering the project.

We are pleased to be working with a diverse group of partners from across the city and beyond, who are collectively striving to achieve the step changes set out within our objectives of creative sector growth. Below outlines our Place Partnership delivery partners:

Portsmouth City Council

University of Portsmouth

Victorious Festival

The Hive

Shaping Portsmouth

Solent Growth Partnership

Hampshire Chamber of Commerce

Multiple community gateway organisations

All of these partners have made a significant contribution and impact to our collective achievements to date for the Place Partnership programme.

Curating Spaces: Southsea Library Window Programme

Curating Spaces is an initiative designed to address the growing need for accessible, visible platforms for local creative talent, while responding to wider challenges in the provision of affordable creative workspace across the city.

Creative workspaces are essential to a thriving cultural economy, supporting artistic development, community wellbeing, and place-making. In Portsmouth, limited studio provision and increasing pressures on space continue to present barriers for artists at all stages of their careers.

Curating Spaces responds to this challenge by activating publicly accessible, high-footfall locations as temporary exhibition platforms, increasing visibility and opportunity for local creatives.

Southsea Library Pilot

In 2025, we partnered with Southsea Library to deliver a pilot programme transforming the library's central precinct-facing window into a curated exhibition space. Across the year, the programme has hosted a rolling series of four-week exhibitions, showcasing a diverse range of emerging and established artists from across Portsmouth.

This highly visible, free-to-access platform:

- Showcases the breadth and quality of local creative practice
- Provides artists with opportunities to generate sales, commissions, and new audiences
- Enhances the cultural offer within a prominent civic space
- Contributes to place activation and community engagement
- Open and Inclusive Curation Model
- Artists are selected through an open call process, and applications are reviewed to represent a broad cross-section of the creative community.

Selection is based on:

- Artistic quality and originality
- Visual impact within a public setting
- Diversity of practice and representation
- Relevance to Portsmouth's cultural identity
- Delivery and Artist Support

We work collaboratively with selected artists to curate and install each exhibition, providing:

- Exhibition space and basic display infrastructure
- Professional presentation and interpretation materials

Right: Window Displays from Freya Perry, Stephen Edwards, Jacqui Denny and Olana Light.



Founding

Partners

Our Partners

Portsmouth Creates was founded to nurture and support the creative sector across the city, and we're proud of the shared mission of our founding partners: **Victorious Festival**, **University of Portsmouth**, and **Portsmouth City Council**.

These relationships are built on collaboration, joint visions for the city's future, and creativity at the heart of all we do.

By aligning strategically across the city, Portsmouth Creates acts as a catalyst for sector growth alongside the support of our partners. Each year, we celebrate these partnerships and the progress we have collectively achieved.





Portsmouth City Council and Portsmouth Creates:

Portsmouth City Council have been integral to Portsmouth Creates' work across the city, throughout all its strands. The partnership aligns with Portsmouth City Vision 2040 and is strengthening the creative economy. Their support and involvement in the Playland Creative Hub has been transformative and necessary in the heart of the Charles Dickens ward. The Council have been integral to the UK City of Culture 2029 bid, supporting with staff members and governance.

University of Portsmouth and Portsmouth Creates:

The collaboration between The University of Portsmouth and Portsmouth Creates is closely linked to the city's wider creative ecosystem. Many staff from across the university have played a big part in Portsmouth's bid for the UK City of Culture 2029 competition, contributing through working groups and steering groups, helping to share the city's Expression of Interest submission due in 2026. The ongoing creative mapping will also form an important part of the full bid.

Victorious Festival and Portsmouth Creates:

The Portsmouth Creates Hub sits at the centre of this vital collaboration. The Hub is a dedicated 16-hut space onsite at the festival, home to the We Create Market where creatives can showcase themselves to the wider festival audience. This year included a successful collaboration with young market traders from the City of Portsmouth College. This partnership is key to celebrating local creatives and amplifying local talent. The team's support with infrastructure and logistics ensures the area is a vibrant space for visitors.



Portsmouth City Council

The strategic partnership between Portsmouth City Council and Portsmouth Creates is a collaboration designed to strengthen the city's cultural and creative economy. Rooted in the shared ambition to position Portsmouth as a vibrant, nationally recognised hub for creativity, this partnership plays a vital role in "putting Portsmouth on the map."

By aligning with the Portsmouth City Vision 2040 and other key citywide strategies, the partnership supports the delivery of long-term goals, including economic resilience, community well-being, and place-making.

Together, Portsmouth City Council and Portsmouth Creates are working to raise the city's cultural profile with major national funders, unlock new inward investment, and drive inclusive growth through creativity, ensuring that culture is not only an expression of identity but a cornerstone of Portsmouth's future.

Our partnership is underpinned by an annual Service Level Agreement to support a focused delivery against Portsmouth City Council objectives.

Playland

The Playland Creative Hub officially opened its doors in 2025. A partnership between Artswork and Portsmouth Creates, the hub has transformed a meanwhile space, with the support of Portsmouth City Council, into a vibrant creative hub in the heart of the Charles Dickens ward, bringing the creative economy back to the high street and making it visible to all.

Formerly an amusement arcade, the downstairs area has now been transformed into a youth-led space, driven by and for the young people of the city. This focus on the underrepresented and often overlooked age group in the sector will allow the hub to inspire and engage with audiences that often don't feel welcome there.

Office space upstairs houses not only Portsmouth Creates, but also creatives from around the city, including Portsmouth Pride, Downtown Pompey, and Pompey Darkroom, who now all call Playland Hub home and are thriving as a result.

Speaking to Pompey Darkroom Founder Karl Bailey, he explained

their work and connection to the Playland Space and the importance of supporting young people in creative careers:

“In the Summer of 2025, Community Stories – a socially engaged photography project – was exhibited in Playland. Made over 2 years, the project involved working with voluntary community organisations in the Charles Dickens ward, one of Portsmouth's most deprived, to tell the story and celebrate the work that these organisations do to support their communities.

As part of this work, there was a series of free workshops for children and teenagers to build their photography skills, engage with thoughts and ideas about what community meant to them, and curate their own exhibition in the space. Young people from Artworks were also involved and given the paid opportunity to assist in facilitating the sessions with Karl. This has led to one of those young people taking on further work with Pompey Darkroom, supporting more workshops.”

2026 looks to further these partnerships with our other tenants and continue the work that began this year to support young people with creative aspirations.



Photography by Dev Place Photos

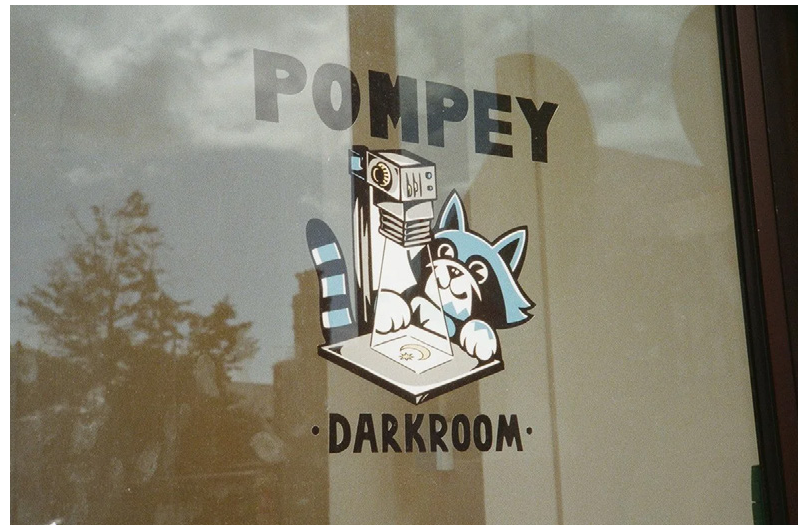


Image source: <https://pompeydarkroom.co.uk>

Who We Reached

Our global communications strategy continues to be centred on people, locations, and communities – highlighting stories, celebrating the city's remarkable creativity, and emphasising opportunities that create longstanding connections. We aim to forge new relationships and ensure that creative work is visible, accessible, inspiring, and inclusive.

These figures, while numerical, stand for residents, artists, creatives, and communities, and the significance of their reach and influence is central to our mission as we strive to amplify voices and honour Portsmouth's vibrant culture. Over the past year, our growth has transformed us into a gateway to the city's cultural and creative experiences.

In 2025, our digital presence continued to grow steadily:

Website Performance

12,000

ACTIVE USERS

85,000

ENGAGEMENTS WITH
CONTENT AND PAGES

AVERAGE VISIT DURATION:

1 Minute

11 Seconds

Social Media Reach

Facebook

531.1K

views

6.4K

content interactions

2.1K

link clicks

10.6K

profile visits

465

new followers



Instagram

345.4K

views

58.5k

Reach

8.4k

content interactions

239

link clicks

7.4K

profile visits

702

new followers

Linked In

22K

impressions

750

followers

665

reactions,
comments and
reposts combined

58%

local or surrounding
audience



Looking

Ahead

As we look ahead to the coming year, Portsmouth Creates remains committed to building on the strong foundations laid through our work during 2025. With renewed energy and a shared vision, we are excited to deliver an ambitious programme that continues to champion creativity, inclusivity, and cultural growth across the city.

In 2026 Portsmouth Creates will be delivering:

In Our Words



The culmination of a year-long focus of literature that will support to increase literacy levels locally and a hope of breaking a Guinness World Record



Bid for UK City of Culture 2029

We Connect Networking





We Connect Conference



Entry Level Business Support



We Connect Workshops



Business Support Programme

A tailored programme of activities to support the growth of the cultural and creative sector



We Thrive Mentoring Programme



We Shine Community

Delivered in partnership with key partners

UK City of Culture Bid

Portsmouth's UK City of Culture 2029 Bid: A Collective Commitment to the City's Future



In 2026, a significant milestone was reached for Portsmouth's cultural and civic future as the Portsmouth Creates Board, Portsmouth City Council, and the city's wider Cultural Collective came together to make the collective decision to move forward with a bid for UK City of Culture 2029.

This decision reflects a shared ambition to showcase Portsmouth's unique identity, rich heritage, vibrant creative sector, and strong sense of community on a national stage. It also demonstrates a collective belief that culture can be a powerful driver of economic growth, social wellbeing, civic pride, and long-term regeneration.



A City-Wide Partnership

The decision to submit a bid has been shaped through extensive collaboration across the city. Cultural organisations, artists, community groups, educational institutions, businesses, residents, and public sector partners have all contributed to the vision for Portsmouth's future.

The bid represents more than an application for a national title. It is an opportunity to bring together diverse voices and communities around a shared purpose, creating a collective narrative that celebrates Portsmouth's strengths while inspiring ambition for the years ahead.

The partnership between Portsmouth Creates, Portsmouth City Council, and the Cultural Collective demonstrate a united commitment to ensuring that culture remains at the heart of the city's development and regeneration.

The Value of the Bid Process

While the UK City of Culture title is highly prestigious, the process of developing a bid delivers significant benefits, regardless of the outcome.

Preparing a bid requires meaningful engagement with communities across the city, encouraging people to share their stories, aspirations, and ideas. Through this process, relationships are strengthened, new partnerships are formed, and a greater sense of connection is developed between neighbourhoods, organisations, and individuals.

The bid development process creates opportunities for residents to actively shape the future of their city. By involving communities in conversations about culture, place, and identity, Portsmouth is building stronger foundations for community cohesion and growth. Importantly, the process itself generates a sense of hope and optimism. Bringing people together around a shared vision helps create confidence in the future, and reinforces a collective belief in what can be achieved through collaboration. At a time when communities across the country face a range of social and economic challenges, the bid provides a positive and unifying focus that encourages pride, belonging and shared ambition.

The Opportunity of Winning

Should Portsmouth be successful in securing the UK City of Culture 2029 title, the benefits could be

transformational. For the first time ever in the competition, the winning city will be awarded £10M in investment.

Previous host cities have demonstrated how the programme can attract significant investment, increase visitor numbers, support local businesses, create employment opportunities, and raise the profile of a city nationally and internationally.

For Portsmouth, a successful bid would provide a platform to celebrate the city's unique maritime heritage, diverse communities, creative talent, and cultural assets. It would enable the delivery of an ambitious programme of events and activities that engage residents and attract visitors, while creating lasting cultural, economic, and social impact.

Winning the title would also help strengthen Portsmouth's reputation as a leading cultural destination, attracting further investment and supporting the growth of the creative economy for years to come.

Thank You!



During the implementation of our Place Partnership, Portsmouth Creates has greatly appreciated the commitment demonstrated by our creative community, organisations and individuals both within the city and beyond.

Our heartfelt thanks go to our **Founding Partners and Funders**, whose belief in our vision and continued support have been instrumental in making Portsmouth Creates a reality.

To our Board Members – thank you for generously sharing your time, expertise, guidance, and

unwavering commitment. Your proactive support and dedication have helped shape and strengthen our work.

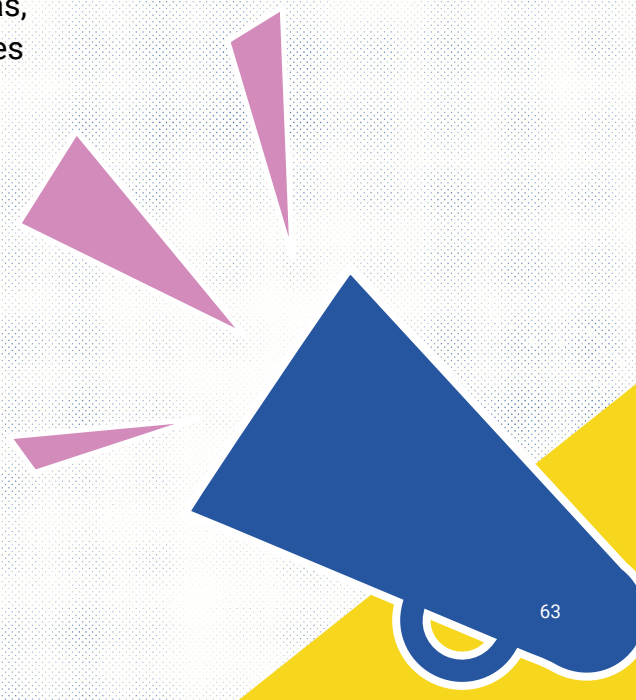
To our Place Partnership Partners – thank you for enabling us to deliver a diverse, collaborative, and cross-disciplinary programme that celebrates creativity across our city.

To our Creative Community – thank you for sharing your ideas, ambitions, and challenges with us. Your openness allows us to better support your growth, champion your work, and create opportunities together.

To the Pompey community – thank you for your curiosity,

enthusiasm, and passion for cultural and creative experiences. You inspire us to champion accessibility, inclusion, and meaningful change.

And to everyone who has been part of our journey – those we've worked alongside, those who have inspired us, and those who will continue to shape our future – thank you. Portsmouth Creates is what it is because of you.





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**UNIVERSITY OF
PORTSMOUTH**



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