



# Future Arts Centres

## Creating the Conditions for Change

How arts centres create  
change with communities  
through culture and creativity

THE FUTURE ARTS CENTRES  
MODEL OF CHANGE





# Executive Summary

Arts centres are increasingly expected to demonstrate their impact through attendance, participation and economic contribution. While these measures are important, they do not fully explain how arts centres create change for people and communities.

This report introduces The Future Arts Centres Model of Change: an evidence-based model developed from more than 200 Most Significant Change (MSC) stories collected across the Future Arts Centres network. Rather than describing what arts centres aspire to achieve, it identifies the patterns of change that consistently emerged from people's own accounts of their experiences.

The findings suggest that arts centres create change in a distinctive way. They do not deliver change as a service; they create the conditions in which change becomes possible.

The model describes this process in three interconnected parts:

- **Conditions** - arts centres create welcoming, safe and creative environments where relationships can develop over time.
- **Experience** - people begin to engage through creative and cultural experiences, activities and relationships, often in ways that feel informal, voluntary and self-directed.
- **Change over time** - through repeated engagement, people frequently describe growing confidence, stronger connections, greater self-expression and agency, sometimes leading to wider changes in their lives.

The model does not suggest that everyone follows the same journey or experiences the same outcomes. Rather, it provides a shared language for understanding the recurring patterns observed across hundreds of stories from audiences, participants and others engaging with arts centres.

A defining feature of the model is the role of arts and culture themselves. Whether through seeing a performance, visiting an exhibition, taking part in creative activity or simply spending time in a cultural environment, creative and cultural experiences provide the context in which relationships develop, confidence grows and change becomes possible.

The Future Arts Centres Model of Change offers a practical framework for organisations, funders, policy-makers and partners to better understand, evaluate and communicate the distinctive contribution that arts centres make to people, communities and places. It demonstrates that the value of arts centres lies not only in the work they present or the activities they deliver, but in the conditions they create, the relationships they sustain and the opportunities they provide for people to engage with arts and culture over time.





# Introduction

Across the cultural sector, there is increasing focus on demonstrating impact. Arts organisations are asked to evidence their value through attendance, reach, and economic contribution. These measures are important, but they do not fully capture the breadth of what arts centres deliver for local communities.

For organisations rooted in place, impact is often relational and cumulative. It is seen in changes in confidence, connection and identity, and in how people feel about themselves over time. This kind of change is widely recognised in practice, but less consistently articulated or evidenced.

Through the use of the Most Significant Change<sup>1</sup> (MSC) technique, Future Arts Centres has supported a growing number of organisations to explore this more deeply. To date, more than 55 arts organisations have been trained in the use of MSC, building a shared body of insight into how change happens in arts centres.

This report draws on that work to propose a model of how arts centres create change.

Importantly, this is an evidence-based model, not a future target or aspirational framework. It has been developed by identifying recurring patterns across hundreds of Most Significant Change stories collected through the Future Arts Centres network. It does not attempt to describe every aspect of arts centre practice, nor every possible outcome of cultural participation. Instead, it describes the patterns of change that appeared consistently within the evidence.

**“It is not about bricks and mortar for us, but the relationship that creates memories, builds loyalty and has an impact on people.”**

Community organiser, The Albany, Deptford

Photograph: The Point, Eastleigh. *Timothy the Yeti*.

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<sup>1</sup> [United Nations Development Programme explanation of MSC evaluation methodology](#)  
[Future Arts Centres use of MSC](#)



# The Challenge

Arts centres occupy a distinctive position within the cultural and civic landscape. They are venues for the development and presentation of artistic work, spaces for participation, social environments and meeting places for multiple local communities.

As other forms of social infrastructure have reduced with the disappearance of many other ‘third spaces’<sup>2</sup>, the role of arts centres has expanded and become increasingly important.

Many arts centres now function as places where people come not only for culture, but also to spend time, connect with others and feel part of something.

Arts centres also operate beyond their buildings, working in partnership across communities and enabling participation in a range of settings. This often provides an entry point into arts and culture for people who may not otherwise engage.

However, the way impact is typically measured does not reflect this. Traditional evaluation focuses on attendance numbers, participation rates and outputs. These approaches describe activity, but they do not explain how or why change happens.

As a result, a significant part of what arts centres do remains under-articulated.

“Once he realised he was accepted for who he is, he just started to open up more.”

Parent of participant, St Margaret’s House, Bethnal Green

Photograph: MAC Birmingham. Photography by Greg Milner

2 [YMCA Beyond the Brink](#)

[House of Commons Research Briefing: Hospitality 2026](#)

[DWP Young People and Work Interim Report 2026](#)

# Methodology

## A PEOPLE-BASED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING IMPACT

Story-based evaluation, such as the Most Significant Change method, offers a way of addressing this gap. Rather than starting with predefined outcomes, it asks people to describe what has changed for them and why that change matters. By looking across many individual stories, it becomes possible to understand how change typically happens in arts centres.

Across more than 100 stories collected from participants, audiences, partners and other people engaged with a single venue, together with more than 100 stories gathered by other Future Arts Centres members from their

communities, remarkably consistent patterns emerged. While every individual’s experience was different, people often described change unfolding in similar ways. The model that follows was derived from those patterns, rather than designed in advance. It describes what was consistently observed across the stories, not what arts centres believe ought to happen.

Taken together, these findings suggest that arts centres create change in a distinctive way.

Arts centres do not deliver change as a service. They create the conditions in which change becomes possible.



# Model of Change

The model describes how change happens in arts centres as a process that unfolds over time, shaped by a combination of environment, relationships and creative activity.



## CONDITIONS

Arts centres create the foundations where change becomes possible.

-  **WELCOME**  
people feel expected and accepted
-  **SAFETY**  
people feel able to be themselves without judgement
-  **RELATIONSHIPS**  
connections with staff and others develop over time
-  **CONSISTENCY**  
people are able to return regularly
-  **CREATIVE CONTEXT**  
activity centres on making, performing or experiencing art

Arts centres do not deliver change as a service. They create the conditions in which change becomes possible.

## EXPERIENCE

Within these conditions, people begin to engage with the arts centre through creative and cultural experiences, activities and relationships.

This often looks like:

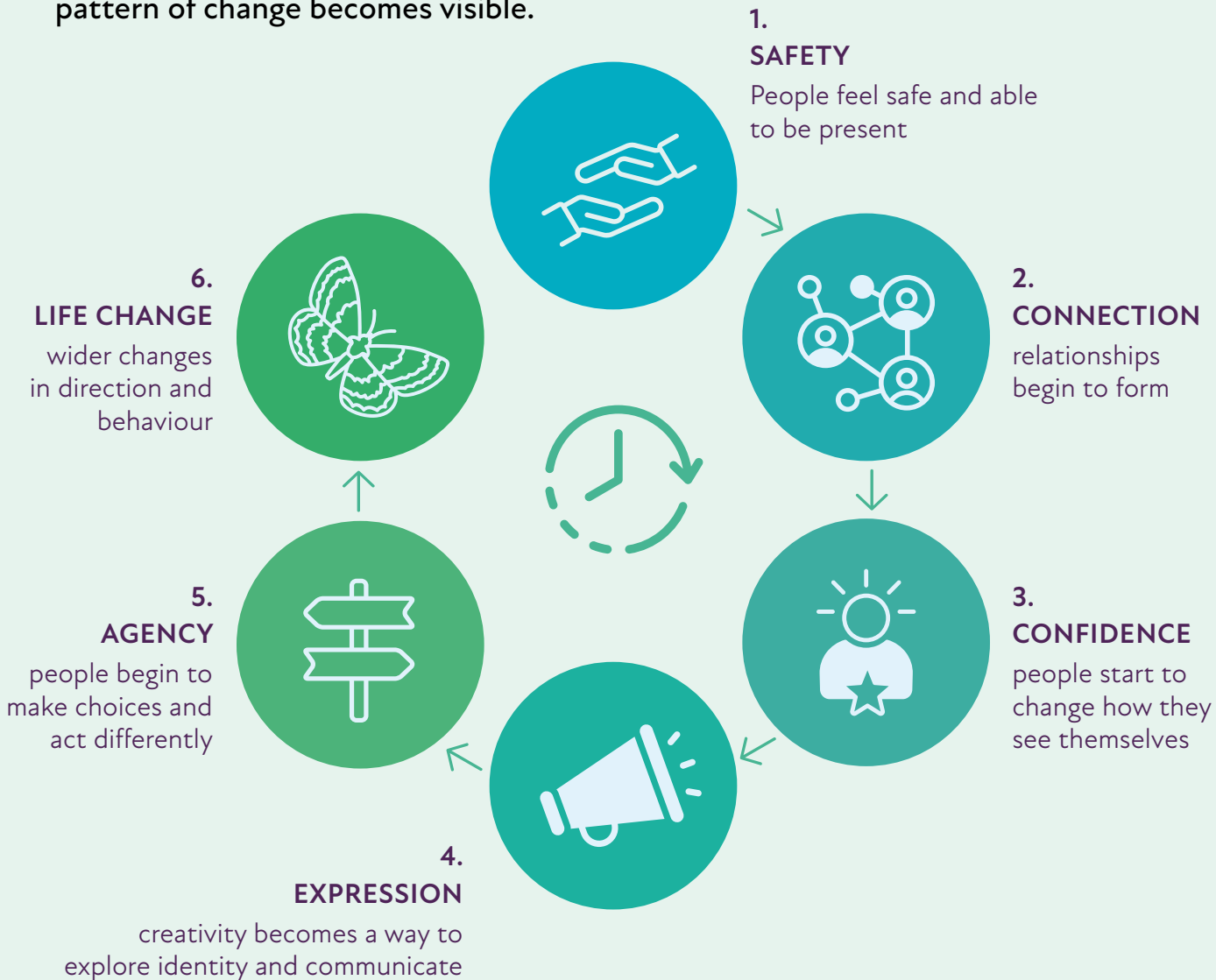
-  **SPENDING TIME IN THE SPACE**
-  **RECOGNISING OTHERS**
-  **TAKING PART AT THEIR OWN PACE**
-  **FEELING PART OF SOMETHING**

This is where the shift begins. Changes may be small, but they are significant.



## CHANGE OVER TIME

With ongoing engagement, a clearer pattern of change becomes visible.



Across many stories, these themes frequently emerged. This is not a fixed progression, and not all people move through all stages.

Change happens in arts centres as a process that unfolds over time, shaped by a combination of environment, relationships and creative activity.







# The role of creativity and culture

A defining feature of this model is the role of creative and cultural experiences. The changes described are not separate from the artistic work, but enabled by it. Whether seeing a performance, visiting an exhibition, taking part in creative activity or simply spending time in a cultural environment, arts and culture provide a shared focus, opportunities for expression and reflection, and a context for interaction. They also give people a reason to return.

Creative and cultural experiences are therefore not simply the setting in which change happens, but the means through which many of these changes become possible.

This distinguishes arts centres from other forms of social or community provision. The impact here is not delivered through services, but through culture.

## Scope of the model

This model focuses primarily on changes experienced by people engaging with arts centres, whether through cultural experiences, creative participation or other forms of involvement, although similar patterns may also be observed in artists, staff and partners.

Arts centres also contribute to wider outcomes including stronger communities, partnership working, civic participation and wider social change. These are important impacts, but they were less consistently reflected in the stories analysed and therefore sit beyond the primary scope of this model.

**“It’s a place where you can leave things at the door.”**

Participant, The Horton, Epsom

**“I feel like I’ve got myself back now.”**

Participant, RivelinCo, Sheffield

Photograph: Tramshed, Cardiff





# Implications for the sector

1

## CONDITIONS MATTER AS MUCH AS PROGRAMMES

Impact is shaped not only by what is delivered, but by how it is experienced. In practice, this places greater importance on welcome and atmosphere, staff relationships, and accessibility.

2

## TIME AND REPETITION ARE ESSENTIAL

Change is rarely immediate. It develops through regular engagement and familiarity, and through relationships that build over time.

3

## IMPACT IS CUMULATIVE

Outcomes do not sit within single activities, but emerge across multiple interactions. This suggests the need to track engagement over longer periods, recognising that progression is not linear

4

## CREATIVITY IS CENTRAL, NOT ADDITIONAL

Art is not an optional layer but the mechanism through which change happens.

5

## ARTS CENTRES ARE PART OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Arts centres are increasingly functioning as places of connection, belonging and stability. Recognising this role has implications for policy, funding and the way partnerships are formed.

“I think everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging to something or someplace like this.”

Volunteer, The Duncairn, Belfast

Photograph: Bradford Arts Centre - Kala Sangam School Workshop.

Photography by Karol Wyszynski





# Using the model

The Future Arts Centres Change Model is not intended as a fixed framework, but as a way of understanding and reflecting on practice.

It can be used to:

- inform programme design, particularly in creating the conditions that enable engagement
- reflect on participant journeys and identify where different programmes support people at different stages
- strengthen evaluation approaches, including story-based methods such as Most Significant Change
- support conversations with local authorities, health partners and other public services about the distinctive contribution of arts centres
- communicate impact more clearly to funders, partners and policy-makers
- support strategic planning by articulating how change happens over time
- provide a shared language for staff, trustees and partners when discussing impact
- inform organisational learning by testing programmes and activities against the conditions known to support change
- support partnership design by helping organisations understand the contribution arts centres make alongside other services

The model focuses primarily on changes experienced by participants and communities, although similar patterns may also be observed in artists, staff and partners.



# Conclusion

**The work of arts centres has always included this kind of impact, but it has not always been clearly described. The Future Arts Centres Model of Change offers a way of making that work visible.**

It shows that change happens not only through what arts centres produce, but through the conditions they create and the relationships they build. The changes described are not separate from engagement with arts and culture, but enabled by it.

Creative and cultural experiences provide the context in which people feel able to connect with others, explore new ways of seeing themselves and over time, become more deeply engaged.

For many, arts centres provide an entry point into arts and culture that they may not otherwise have accessed. The model helps to explain how arts centres engage people who do not initially see the arts as something for them, and how that engagement can deepen over time.

The challenge now is to ensure that this understanding is reflected in how arts centres are supported, evaluated and valued. The value of the model lies not in simplifying complex human journeys, but in providing a shared evidence-based language for understanding them.

For arts centres, this model provides a way to articulate existing practice more clearly, supporting strategy, evaluation and communication. It reinforces the importance of welcome, relationships, consistency and creative activity as core to how impact happens.

For funders, it means supporting work that develops over time, and recognising that the conditions which enable impact, including welcome, relationships and consistency, are as important as the activity itself. It also means recognising that this way of working is central to reaching a broader and more diverse range of people, particularly those who would not normally engage with arts and cultural activity.

This includes sustained investment in the ability of arts centres to develop and make work, not only to present it. It is through this combination of making, participation and shared experience that people begin to engage, and through which deeper and longer-term impact becomes possible.

For policy-makers, this means recognising that arts centres are contributing to social infrastructure, and that their value cannot be understood through attendance and outputs alone.

For partners, it means understanding that arts centres offer something distinct: a non-clinical, creative environment in which people connect, participate and change, often over sustained periods.

This is not about redefining what arts centres do, but about recognising it more clearly, and ensuring that the conditions which make this work possible are properly understood, supported and sustained.

Future Arts Centres is a national network of more than 190 arts centres across the UK. We strengthen the sector through leadership and organisational development, peer networks, research and advocacy, championing the essential role arts centres play in communities. Together, our members reach millions of people each year through arts, culture and creative participation.

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