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# Insights from the Northern Creative Corridor Workshops Sprint

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The Creative PEC is funded by:



## **Background to this brief**

This briefing paper is intended to help inform the development of a workplan for the Northern Creative Corridor. It summarises key insights from a series of policy workshops run by the Creative PEC and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) between November 2023 and February 2024 with over 70 stakeholders from across industry, local and national government. The workshops sought to identify the perceived barriers and enablers of growth in the North of England's creative industries, before co-designing policy intervention ideas.

This is an edited version of a paper presented to signatories of the Northern Creative Corridor Charter at a Summit in February 2024. The policy ideas and insights included here are intended as starting points for further development, rather than definitive recommendations.

## **About the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre**

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) works to support the growth of the UK's creative industries through the production of independent and authoritative evidence and policy advice.

Led by Newcastle University, with the Royal Society of Arts and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Creative PEC comprises a core consortium of Newcastle University, Work Advance, the University of Sussex and the University of Sheffield.

The PEC works with a diverse range of industry partners.

For more details visit <http://www.pec.ac.uk> and @CreativePEC

## **Citation**

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## Contents

1. Introduction .....	4
2. Why a Northern Creative Corridor? .....	4
3. Key insights from the Northern Creative Corridors Workshops.....	5
3.1. The Skills To Grow .....	6
3.2. Access to Finance .....	7
3.3. R&D and Innovation.....	8
3.4. Arts, Culture and Heritage .....	10
4. Next Steps.....	11

## 1. Introduction

The [Northern Creative Corridor](#) is a live initiative that aims to join-up creative clusters and microclusters across the North of England to drive regional growth in the creative industries. It was initiated by a coalition of regional and national partners including the Royal Society of Arts, Creative PEC, Arts Council England, the BBC and several Northern Mayors, who are working together to develop a pan-regional strategy that can harness national and devolved powers, as well as coordinate industry action.

Previous analysis has highlighted the significant economic growth a creative corridor could help unlock for the region: if the creative industries' 3% contribution to gross value added (GVA) in the North were to rise to half that of London and the South East's 10% share of GVA, [it could lead to a GVA boost of up to £10 billion by 2030](#).

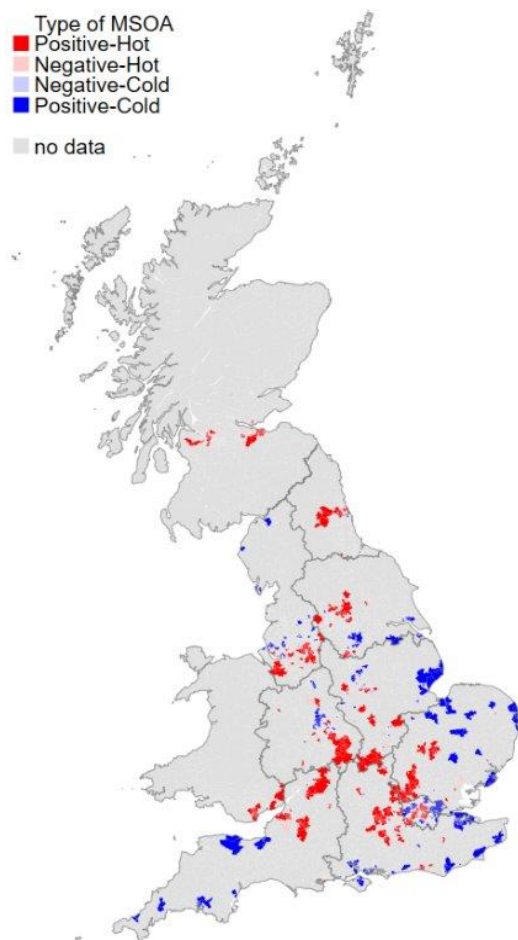
## 2. Why a Northern Creative Corridor?

In June 2023, the BBC, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, RSA and Creative PEC convened key leaders in the creative industries across the North at a summit to explore the potential of a Northern Creative Corridor. The ambition of creative corridors is [to stimulate growth by increasing linkages](#) – be they supply-chains, R&D partnerships, or networks of people in the labour market – between creative clusters and microclusters over a large geographic area.

Whilst a creative corridor is a novel concept, it draws inspiration from similar domestic and international initiatives. These include the tech-focused [Innovation Corridors in Canada](#) and Silicon Valley, and UK-based initiatives like [the Thames Estuary Production Corridor](#), and [Cardiff-Newport](#) and [Bristol-Bath](#) creative partnerships. A forthcoming report by the Creative PEC and RSA, supported by Arts Council England, provides a summary of existing evidence for creative corridors and shares relevant case studies.

**Figure 1** - Map of creative hotspots based on share of creative businesses 2022 using data from ONS Business Register

Source: Siepel, J., Ramirez-Guerra, A., and Rathi, S. (2024). 'Geographies of Creativity'. Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre. DOI : 10.5281/zenodo.10245530



Using experimental analysis, the Creative PEC has previously identified [seven areas in the UK with the potential for corridor-style interventions](#). A Northern Creative Corridor emerged as a strong candidate for a testbed, with analysis suggesting that a corridor from Liverpool through Manchester and Leeds to Newcastle upon Tyne could join up adjacent microclusters, strengthen supply chains between firms based in the North, and amplify existing spillover benefits seen in the region. As part of the ongoing devolution of political powers to the North, there are also a number of [newly formed mayoral combined authorities with trailblazing devolution deals](#), devolved budgets and greater decision-making powers for culture, creative industries and place-based change that create unique opportunities for action in the region. Several of the Northern Mayoral Combined Authorities have signed the [Northern Creative Charter](#) and announced their support for the initiative.

These developments, alongside strategic investments in creative industries like the [Tees Valley Investment Zone](#) and programmes like [AHRC's Creative Industries Clusters Programme](#) make it timely to consider what further opportunities there might be to support the creative industries through strategic coordination across the North of England.

### 3. Key insights from the Northern Creative Corridors Workshops

The following section summarises qualitative insights on the barriers to and enablers of creative industries growth that the Northern Creative Corridor could address, and policy ideas developed in the workshops. Each was structured around several 'pre-conditions for regional creative industries growth' [identified in our previous briefing paper on the North of England's creative industries](#). These were: access to finance, skills to grow and unlocking innovation. A fourth pre-condition on the role of the Arts, Culture and Heritage sub-sectors was also included.

### 3.1. The Skills To Grow

Whilst in many respects the creative industries encapsulate the vision of a high-skilled and productive economy, there [remain significant challenges for the sector's skills and talent pipeline, including in the North of England](#). At a national level there are major skills gaps and shortages: [42% of employers in the creative industries report problems finding staff](#) with the skills they need. Within education, national policies like Progress 8 disincentivise the take-up of creative subjects in schools. Freelancers also comprise over a [quarter of the creative workforce in the North of England](#), and face specific challenges in accessing training and up-skilling.

The workshops explored the creative education and skills system across formal and informal education, including continuous professional development and technical education, and the opportunities of devolved skills powers at a Mayoral and local level in the North of England. **Three priority areas for the Northern Creative Corridor emerged: raising awareness of creative careers in schools; developing modular and flexible technical education and CPD opportunities; and exploring regional strategies for creative industries apprenticeships.**

#### Workshop insights

- Attendees highlighted the need for policymakers to better consider the specific nature of work in the creative industries when developing education and skills policy. Work in the creative industries is often project-based, and highly modular. They further noted that traditional forms of assessment can be at odds with the portfolio-first methods of assessment seen in recruitment practices for the sector. Examples of existing best practice shared by attendees included the Tees Valley Combined Authority Creative Places work with the RSA.
- Attendees felt there was a national crisis of supply and demand for creative education at secondary level, which was holding back sector growth in the region. Many highlighted a lack of awareness in young people of creative careers and opportunities in the North of England, with some suggesting that parents dissuade young people from taking-up these opportunities.
- Attendees expressed concern about a potentially growing skills gap in the North of England, not only from 'brain drain' of talent the South, but also due to the phase-out of Level-3 qualifications and the introduction of T-Levels. T-Levels currently may provide fewer opportunities for work experience in cultural cold-spots.
- A recurring issue highlighted was the reform of apprenticeship levies to allow for more flexible transfers and better use of unspent funds. Some suggested that developing regional sector skills pots could provide an effective avenue. Equally, attendees noted that regional pilots aimed at increasing supply and demand for creative industries apprenticeships would be welcomed. Initiatives like the Power Up apprenticeships

programme in Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle were highlighted as examples of good practice. The important role that corporate partners; large public service broadcasters and non-profit organisations already play in supporting apprenticeships in the region, was also highlighted as an important foundation to build from.

- Some attendees suggested that more effective matching of skilled professionals with opportunities might address perceived skills gaps and shortages. Representatives of the screen sector pointed to [Screen Alliance North's pan-regional databases of crew members](#), suggesting this could be scaled across sectors and geographic areas.

### **Policy intervention ideas from the workshops**

- Scale-up existing initiatives like the [DCMS Creative Careers Programme](#) to develop more targeted outreach programmes across the North of England. These would tackle perceptions of the creative industries as difficult to build a career in by connecting young people and parents with creative industries professionals in the region.
- A pan-regional training brokerage service between skills providers and creative professionals, that could act as a one-stop shop between the two communities and address the bureaucracy on both sides.
- A pan-regional tax credit incentive programme to retain a skilled Northern workforce, increasing the breadth of opportunities across the North and avoiding the current 'brain drain' to London.
- An industry and local/combined authority led pan-regional commitment to training local apprentices from marginalised backgrounds. This initiative could be pioneered by employers in the North (e.g. BBC, ITV) who have made some steps towards this already.

### **3.2. Access to Finance**

Undercapitalisation is significant across the Creative Industries, with [69% of creative businesses flagging a need for more finance](#). Creative PEC research has also shown that creative firms in the North are [more likely than their counterparts across the UK to view access to finance as a barrier to growth](#), a need which could be addressed through Northern Creative Corridor initiatives.

The workshops explored the challenges faced by the region in accessing public and private funding, and how access to finance might be unlocked from new sources for the creative industries in the North. **Two priority areas for the Northern Creative Corridor emerged: scaling up and expanding existing place-based funding opportunities; and attracting the attention of venture capital firms and angel investors to the Northern creative industries.**

## Workshop insights

- Attendees shared the perception that the sector is widely misunderstood by private investors, with the perception that it is riskier to invest in creative businesses.
- Universities were recognised as important anchor institutions, with a role in unlocking access to finance. [AHRC's Creative Clusters programme](#) was highlighted as existing good practice in unlocking finance in Yorkshire, as was the work of [Creative Fuse North East in piloting interventions through its Rural Challenge](#).
- Venture capital was perceived to be particularly concentrated in London, with attendees pointing to issues with 'patchy' investment outside of the 'golden triangle' of Oxford, Cambridge and London. Attendees reported that there is a disconnected investment ecosystem, where investors don't work together across the whole of the UK.
- The devolution of further powers to mayoral combined authorities across the North was also identified as an opportunity for greater public investment in Northern creative industries sub-sectors, but with an acknowledgement that the public sector would not be able to make up most of the funding needed across the region. In particular, policy interventions such as [the Creative Enterprise Zones in London](#), ['Town of Culture' programme in Greater Manchester](#) and the [Creative and Cultural Zones in Newcastle](#) were shared as examples of how devolution could benefit SMEs in the creative industries, with a place-based, tailored approach to regions in the North.

## Policy intervention ideas from the workshops

- Convening northern creative industries firms under a single banner, to present a single point of contact to private investors, unlocking finance from angel investors and venture capital firms for regional investment opportunities.
- Asking public funding bodies like UKRI and Combined Authorities to build more place-based, freelancer-specific funds aimed at building confidence in accessing public finance. Examples like [Creative Fuse North East's Rural Challenge](#) and [GMCA's Inspire Fund](#) were cited as interventions which might be scaled up.
- Providing wraparound support within investment programmes, training creative firms how to better access private and public funding opportunities.

### 3.3. R&D and Innovation

The Creative Industries represents [a fast-growing percentage of business](#) in the UK, and the UK Government's Plan for Growth has identified them as an area of [competitive advantage in research and innovation](#). However, creative businesses [face barriers to attracting investment for R&D and innovation](#).

These workshops explored the challenges faced by creative businesses across the North of



England in funding and carrying out R&D and innovation processes. **Three priority areas for the Northern Creative Corridor emerged: developing new definitions and metrics for assessing creative R&D processes; building on existing opportunities for funding innovation and R&D; and making the process of applying to R&D and innovation funds simpler for SMEs and freelancers.**

## Workshop insights

- Universities in the North of England, and funding bodies like UKRI, were recognised as playing a pivotal role creative R&D. UKRI-funded projects like [CoSTAR](#) and [Creative Industries Clusters](#) programmes were cited as stimulating R&D collaborations between universities and creative firms.
- Attendees agreed that a better understanding of creative R&D processes across the full range of creative sub-sectors was needed, as well as a better understanding of the determinants of increased R&D activity at a sub-sector level.
- The 'invisible' nature of much creative R&D or development work was seen to present a unique set of challenges for increasing investment. [As creative R&D processes are often not formally included in budgets](#), the work is undervalued, and the expectation that this work needs to be done for free is common. Attendees agreed that there was a need to find ways to value and commercialise creative R&D processes. Existing small-scale examples of commercialisation in the sector, like artist collective [Marshmallow Laser Feast](#), whose immersive installations are sold to corporate partners for a second life, were shared.
- Attendees highlighted barriers faced by creative firms to accessing public R&D and innovation funding. These included a lack of resource in creative firms to navigate application processes, and firms being disincentivised to apply by perceptions that these funds were highly competitive. Attendees suggested that raising awareness with creative firms of relevant funding opportunities, and of existing support on bid-writing from bodies like UKRI, could help to address some of these perceived barriers.
- Attendees highlighted the perception that current R&D/innovation funding opportunities tend to favour creative projects with a 'tech' angle.

## Policy intervention ideas from the workshops

- Adopt the Frascati Manual definition of R&D, which recognises R&D in the creative industries.
- After addressing the gap in understanding subsector-specific R&D processes across creative industries, further tailoring R&D tax credits to these sub-sectors, and their R&D needs.
- Increase regional R&D grants/incentives to provide sector-specific investment opportunities. This could include developing an R&D/Innovation fund for the Northern Creative Corridor.

- Producing guidance for public R&D application processes through consultations for the sector to better meet the needs of SME's and freelancers.

### 3.4. Arts, Culture and Heritage

The North of England is home to renowned cultural organisations and events. Creative PEC research [has measured the economic value of cultural and heritage institutions](#), and shown how these can support the growth of the sector, [be it in supporting local creative microclusters](#) or by [playing a role in supporting creative R&D](#).

The workshops explored challenges faced by Northern Arts, Culture and Heritage Institutions, from competition for smaller funding pots to the undervaluing of the subsector by funders and policymakers. **Three priority areas for the Northern Creative Corridor emerged: addressing the dearth of funding for the sector; showcasing the region's strengths; and improving working conditions for freelancers in arts, culture and heritage.**

#### Workshop insights

- Attendees highlighted significant concerns with declining funding for cultural institutions, exacerbated by high inflation. However, some suggested that devolution deals had improved the funding landscape in small ways for freelancers and SMEs. An example of this shared was Greater Manchester Combined Authority's [Inspire Fund](#), created in collaboration with cultural freelancers.
- Attendees also highlighted the culture of collaboration that already exists across Northern cultural organisations, noting that these collaborations are often rooted in shared regional identity and pride. These ranged from collaborative projects, to recommending creative freelancers for work at peer organisations.
- [The 'Preston Model' of community wealth building](#) by rooting procurement in the region was held up as an approach that could be used by a Northern Creative Corridor.
- Attendees noted the important role major cultural events can play in attracting resource and talent to the region. The emphasised that there are already plenty of existing opportunities to showcase the arts, culture and heritage output of the North, such as the [Manchester Science Festival](#), [Leeds Festival](#), and [Durham Lumiere](#).
- Attendees shared concerns that there is not enough wraparound support for freelancers who wanted to build a career in the arts in the region. Attendees felt a Northern Creative Corridor could help to improve working practices in the region, building on existing good practice such as [the GMCA Good Employment Charter](#) and [Liverpool City Region Combined Authority's Fair Employment Charter](#).

## Policy intervention ideas from the workshops

- Create a 'support fund' to subsidise costs for smaller venues: this would be administrated by local authorities and funded by adding small levies (e.g. £1) to tickets for arena and stadium shows in the area.
- A 'creative tourist tax', building on the rollout of city taxes across hotels in Manchester and Liverpool respectively to create further pots of funding for freelancers and SMEs in the sector.
- With many Northern MCAs signing development deals, attendees suggested that these development deals might include a cultural clause, with developers building in Northern cities expected to partner with local cultural institutions, to give back to the local creative community and economy.
- Creating economic incentives (e.g. tax credits, or an updated pan-regional [enterprise allowance scheme](#)) at the regional and local level for the freelance and SME community.
- Set-up an umbrella body to convene freelancers working across the North, which could advocate for better working conditions and improved access to resources and workspaces for freelancers.

## 4. Next Steps

Following the 2024 UK General Election, signatories of the Northern Creative Corridor Charter will take forward proposals for a Northern Creative Corridor under the banner of ['One Creative North'](#) led by Tracy Brabin (Mayor of West Yorkshire Combined Authority).

The findings from the Northern Creative Corridor and Creative Corridor workshop sprints will be published in a forthcoming report from the RSA and Arts Council England, detailing a policy framework for designing and implementing creative corridor interventions.