Reflections on a year in digital culture

2025

the space

thespace.org



Famehungry, Louise Orwin

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Foreword

As Chair, I am immensely proud of the pioneering work showcased in this year's impact report.

The remarkable projects commissioned and led by The Space, hold inclusivity and commitment to the creative sectors at their core, challenging prevailing stereotypes and broadening horizons. Artists and organisations are pushing boundaries, inviting wider audiences and new perspectives. Access and inclusion are woven seamlessly into the fabric of the work itself, which is truly heartening.

By supporting such innovative projects, The Space is helping to dismantle longstanding barriers ensuring that voices, stories and creativity are embedded within the mainstream cultural and creative landscapes. This commitment to accessibility is not only a matter of fairness, but essential for a vibrant, relevant, and forward-thinking creative arts sector, especially with important traction in innovation, createch and digital platforms.

On behalf of our Board, I would like to thank all the team, artists, collaborators, and partners involved, for their bold vision and tireless dedication. Your contributions and reflections continue to inspire and remind us all of the power of the arts to connect, heal, challenge and transform our world.

We are immensely grateful for the support we have received from our funders and partners in 2024/25. This trust, and excitement, for the work provided by The Space has allowed vital initiatives from the team to flourish. We look forward to these valued relationships continuing.



Ri Chakraborty – Chair

Valuing artists



Fiona Morris –
Creative Director
and Chief Executive

Throughout 2025, artists and cultural organisations have continued to inspire us with their creativity, commitment and resilience. Our work this year has underlined the difference that support from The Space can make – both to help creative people innovate with digital technologies and to support them to platform their work digitally.

The importance of seeing and hearing from artists feels especially critical in these current times. The arts are crucial to society for myriad reasons; to foster empathy and understanding, to encourage inclusion, to promote collaboration and to inspire creative thinking. And I believe artists' talents – their distinctive voices, lateral approaches, new and unexpected perspectives – are invaluable to local, national and international conversations about the future for us all.

Sadly, in an era of global turbulence and uncertainty, the voices of our storytellers are being lost. The rapid revolution in the media landscape is just one factor that has resulted in a significant reduction in opportunities for artists to share their work through the mainstream media.

As an organisation, we're concerned, and we think others should be too.

That's why we are introducing Bringing Artists Back, an initiative that aims to celebrate our artists and storytellers, showcases how their voices add to the public discourse and invites partners to unite to find solutions, share platforms and support the artists of today and tomorrow.

As a curtain raiser for Bringing Artists Back, please see the short trailer here and do get in touch if you would like to be involved.

As if to prove my point about the power of creativity, I'd also like to shout out to the nine library services across England we are working with as part of Digital Spaces. We're so proud of the digital work they are presenting, and the open-hearted and ambitious way they've responded to the opportunities on offer. The reaction they have already received from their communities has been wonderful and we look forward to continuing to support them on their digital journeys.

At a time of such uncertainty around funding for arts and culture, we are very grateful to Arts Council England and our other funding partners including BFI and The National Lottery Heritage Fund for their continued belief in, and support, for our work. I would also like to take the opportunity to welcome our new chair – Ri Chakraborty, and several new board members, and to acknowledge the invaluable support, input and advocacy our board members continue to bring to their role on behalf of The Space.

Finally, what we hope makes this Reflections Report distinctive is that it features the voices of The Space's team who work with artists and organisations every day. Their insights offer a nuanced view of what's happening across the sector: what's working, what's emerging, and what's needed next. I hope you'll find their perspectives as thoughtful and energising as I have.



The Speaking Garden, Leeds Central Library

A year of digital culture in numbers....



Provided free digital training and support to

647 cultural organisations

111 freelance individuals



Received

310

applications for commissioning and mentoring opportunities



Helped create

22

digital and broadcast projects



Hosted

26

free talks and webinars



Convened

19

specialised mentoring sessions with a focus on digital accessibility



Published

20

free online resources

Screenings, festivals & awards

Space commissions have traveled all over the world, appearing at prestigious Festivals and picking up awards along the way....

CPH:Dox, Copenhagen

San Francisco Dance Festival, USA

Flatpack

Raindance

Manchester Lift Off

Buffalo Roots Film Festival, Rome
Best Short Animation Award for MBD's Voyagers

Golden Prague, Czechoslovakia

Hay Festival

Rockies, Canada

Challenging stereotypes through accessible experiences



Sarah Butcher –
Executive Producer &
Freelance Associate

This year The Space has commissioned several d/Deaf and disabled-led arts organisations and artists whose work stretch boundaries and challenge stereotypes. Many of the projects we've commissioned engage with the artist's own lived experience as the catalyst for their work.

Cathy Mager's Hand Ships Sail explores the deaf experience through a poetic conversation between two women in BSL, exploring what it's like to feel 'invisible' to the hearing world. The work was projected onto the Cunard building in Liverpool as part of DadaFest's 40th anniversary celebrations. The piece is audio described, subtitled and was filmed in situ for those unable to see it in person but crucially access was built into the artwork's DNA as it invites everyone to connect with the deaf experience.



Hands Ship Sail, Cathy Mager

> *Access is built into the artwork's DNA.*

Arty Party and Anjali Dance both work with disabled and learning-disabled dancers, creating access through opportunity to professional experiences.

Anjali's short film Bloodsuckers saw the company of dancers explore making film using green screen, in a playful retelling of their Nosterafu-inspired touring work.

Arty Party's short film, Our Circle in the Storm explored the co-creation of a narrative dance short, resulting in a call-to-action piece that centres the vulnerability of disabled people in a climate crisis. Both pieces put work by disabled dancers into the short film circuit – promoting representation and how the work of disabled artists is vital to an artistic exploration of our times.

> *The work of disabled artists is vital to artistic exploration of our times.*

Working on some of these projects has been a privilege and underlined to me the importance of supporting and positioning this work as part of the professional mainstream, which disabled artists and groups are too often excluded from.

CASE STUDIES



Our Circle in the Storm, Arty Party

Arty Party's Our Circle in the Storm

Through movement and shared choreography, Our Circle in the Storm – featuring a cast of dancers with and without disabilities – draws attention to how climate change disproportionately impacts disabled communities, inviting audiences to consider how empathy and solidarity can shape our collective response.

Our Circle in the Storm reimagines how we talk about climate change: through movement, care and connection rather than fear. The film premiered on YouTube and as part of a hybrid event at OMH Cinema in Shrewsbury. It has gone on to be screened at film festivals around the world, winning many Awards.

Watch the trailer here



Bloodsuckers, Anjali Dance Company

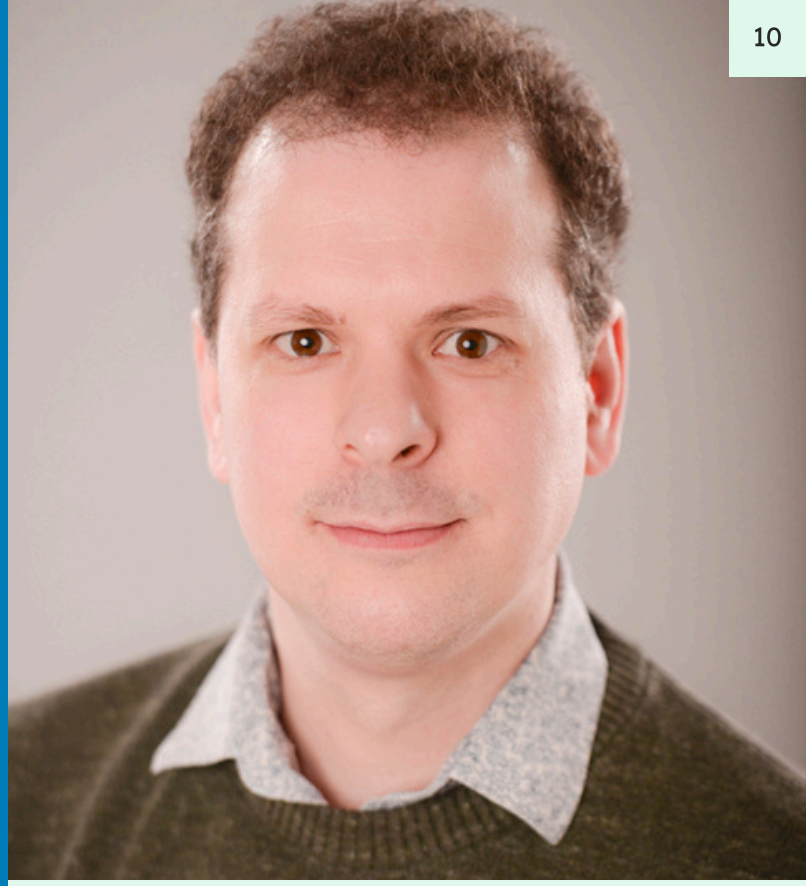
Bloodsuckers

Anjali Dance Company's Bloodsuckers, choreographed by Lea Anderson, reimagines the company's celebrated 2017 touring production through a cinematic lens. Performed by a company of learning disabled dancers, the film samples and remixes the language of silent film, expressionist cinema, and horror tropes to create a new cinematic form that is both humorous and visually striking.

The film premiered online at Halloween for 48 hours on Anjali's YouTube channel, with an accompanying audio-described version. The digital release was complemented by a sensory wrap-around experience for in-person screenings, where visitors could touch and explore props and costumes from the film.

Watch the trailer here

Celebrating creative communities across the Black Country



Rob Lindsay –
Head of Programmes



Black Country by the Sea, Alex Billingham

Our Black Country Digital Firsts Programme was designed in response to the disproportionally low level of funding applications coming from Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton, to The Space's commissioning programme compared to other parts of the country.

While these areas contain thriving cultural organisations and fantastic artists, there is a perception within these boroughs that national funding does not come to this part of the country, and with fewer examples to counter this perception, fewer people apply for available funding.

> *These areas contain thriving cultural organisations and fantastic artists.*

To combat this, in collaboration with our colleagues at Creative Black Country, we earmarked funding for 15 projects by creatives in the region. We focused on lowering barriers for entry and built in greater support to help applicants develop their proposals from initial ideas.

Immediately, we found that the ambition, creativity and quality of applications was no lower than from other parts of the country. Proposals often centered the applicant's voice and experience, and there was a notable desire to celebrate their local communities.

> *we found ambition, creativity and quality...there was a desire to celebrate local communities*

Despite a surprising amount of imposter syndrome, the artists we've worked with have been talented and passionate. Living in Sandwell myself, I am incredibly proud of this programme of diverse, engaging, often thrillingly independent work. As this pilot programme continues to develop, I am looking forward to amplifying these voices and building confidence in the region around national funding opportunities.

Capture Revolution, long live capture



Natalie Woolman –
Executive Producer,
Broadcast and Special Projects

There will always be an appetite for a sensational show beautifully filmed – the chance to extend the life of an artwork or performance and bring it to a greater, more diverse or more dispersed audience. A Choral Pilgrimage with The Sixteen – filmed at Peterborough Cathedral and acquired by the BBC – is an exquisite example.

And we are seeing more and more artists and producers thinking laterally about what it means to share a piece of work with digital audiences.

The term 'capture' has always struck me as both a strange and a strangely appropriate way to describe the attempt to communicate the essence of a piece of art to an audience who are experiencing it through a different medium to the one it was originally created for.



A Choral Pilgrimage, The Sixteen

And this is what artists and producers are interrogating: how to 'capture' the spirit of an artwork. What will give audiences a similar emotional or intellectual experience to the original? An increasingly hybrid approach to formats – such as adding cinematic, immersive, interactive, audio or animated elements to filmed content – further pushes the boundaries of what we think of as a 'capture' project.

One example this year was Zarah Hussain's Paradise Carpet, a stunning installation at The Art House in Wakefield. When faced with the question of how to extend the reach of this piece, the team created a video of the shape-shifting projections with a new audio meditation to bring digital audiences a mesmerising, reflective experience similar to that which gallery visitors had had.

> *Artists are interrogating how to 'capture' the spirit of an artwork.*

And Broadway in Nottingham wrestled with the very essence of what it means when a performance is 'live' and when it's 'captured' with its mixed reality work Replica in which a live dancer interacts with a virtual 'digital double', creating an intimate, highly emotional experience, which is rarely possible as an individual within a crowd at a venue.

As the line between our online and real life experiences becomes ever blurrier, there is rich territory for artists to explore how to reimagine and recreate their creative concepts for digital audiences in such a way that they make the same impact and connection.

CASE STUDIES



A Choral Pilgrimage, The Sixteen

A Choral Pilgrimage with The Sixteen

Earlier this year, The Space supported one of the world's finest choirs - The Sixteen – capturing their Choral Pilgrimage concert at Peterborough Cathedral. From the songs of medieval abbess Hildegard of Bingen to a brand new piece for choir and solo violin by composer Anna Clyne, the works speak of peace and acceptance. It was broadcast on BBC Four and is available on BBC iPlayer.

Watch on BBC iPlayer



Paradise Carpet, Zarah Hussain

Paradise Carpet

Paradise Carpet is an immersive light installation by British-Muslim artist Zarah Hussain, commissioned by The Art House in Wakefield. The light carpet transforms traditional Islamic geometric patterns into a living, responsive digital artwork, weaving ever-changing patterns around its visitors, who are invited to interact with the work whilst bathed in coloured light.

To extend access, The Space supported the creation of a companion video capturing the installation's evolving projections and adding a newly composed audio meditation.

More info



Replica, Displace Studio

Replica

Replica is a Mixed Reality performance from Displace Studio which uses immersive technology to display a virtual dancer who interacts with and occupies the same space as a live performer - allowing her to duet with a digital double. The virtual dancer is viewed through a VR headset enabling audiences to discover how it feels when real and virtual performers interact in real-time. It prompts us to explore how we connect with each other in a world of growing digitisation. It has been shortlisted for a Lumen Prize.

More info

Finding your audience in a fragmented media landscape



Rosanna Chianta –
Head of Content Distribution
and Audience Evaluation

The online landscape is constantly evolving, and the past 12 months has been no exception. We're seeing increasing polarisation on social media, an overwhelming volume of content at every turn, and a growing number of channels competing for our attention. If you're an arts organisation looking to find an audience for your work, it can feel daunting to know where to start.

Being thoughtful and creative about how – and where – to find the audience for your work is key. Because this fragmented media landscape also presents an opportunity. By carefully considering who your work is relevant to and how it can fulfil a need in their lives, you can meet your audience where they are and tailor your message to resonate.

The Space 2024/25 commissions offer some great examples of this: from Ballet Queer's This is How I Move: NAIA, which premiered on Nowness to a global audience during Transgender Awareness Week, to Levenshulme Old Library's You Are Here audio stories set in (and signposted around) local parks. Both demonstrate the power of relevant partnerships in getting your work noticed.

We've also seen effective hybrid distribution strategies that include in-person experiences alongside online. Unspun Stories, an immersive experience about Bradford's textiles heritage, premiered as part of Bradford 2025 before edited films were shared online and via film festivals, including being projected onto the Cow and Calf rocks on Ilkley Moor with headsets, silent disco style, as part of the Bradford DFF short film festival. Initiative.dkf's powerful dance film Interruption gained praise on its online release before being selected for film festivals including Aesthetica, Women X and InShadow – Lisbon Screendance Festival. The Minny Stynker AR Experience was designed to be shared with young people in libraries, schools, and hospices, and gained wider visibility through an influencer partnership.

> *Being thoughtful and creative about how – and where – to find the audience for your work is key.*



Minny Stynker , Soap Soup Theatre

We're seeing more organisations collaborate with influencers and content creators to reach new audiences in an authentic way. The Art House Wakefield benefited from inviting local influencers to the launch of Zarah Hussain's Paradise Carpet during Wakefield's Light Up weekend; while Little Seeds Music gained huge traction with gaming influencers for the launch of their family-friendly game, Adventures of a Cat in Space.

CASE STUDIES



This Is How I Move: NAIA ,
Ballet Queer

This is How I Move: NAIA

Ballet Queer is the UK's first LGBTQ+ ballet company and This Is How I Move: NAIA is the company's first public-facing piece of work. Choreographed by Jonathan Watkins, the film explores Naia Bautista's experience as a trans woman and dancer, as she challenges and rewrites her lived experience to discover a new world through dance.

The film premiered on NOWNESS during Transgender Awareness Week, attracting over 290k views on social media and gaining over 600 new followers for Ballet Queer.

More info



You Are Here,
Levenshulme Old Library

"A very inventive project. I really appreciate the creativity on my doorstep, and the chance to look at my local area in a new light."
You Are Here listener

You Are Here

This podcast series produced by Levenshulme Old Library shows that world class storytelling doesn't need grand stages or metropolitan settings – it can thrive right where we are. The project is not only about finding art in your neighbourhood, it's also about finding art about your neighbourhood. The series features five specially commissioned short stories by some of Manchester's finest fiction writers, each set in and inspired by one of Levenshulme's parks and green spaces. Visitors to these parks were met with signs inviting them to scan a QR code and listen to the stories. 89% of survey respondents agreed it changed their understanding of the local area for the better.

More info



Adventures of a Cat in Space ,
Little Seeds Music & Tall Story Games

Adventures of a Cat in Space

This cosy point-and-click video game is a collaboration between family music specialists Little Seeds Music and narrative game developers Tall Story Games. Players take on the role of a cat stranded in space after an unexpected mishap. To make their way back to Earth, they must explore a vast and colourful array of planets, solve puzzles, and unlock songs that will help guide them home. The game features 11 original songs composed by David Gibb and stars Olivier award winner Arthur Darvill (Doctor Who). The demo launch in February 2025 was met with huge buzz, receiving over 44k downloads across Steam, Xbox, Nintendo Switch and the App Store in the first six weeks, and extensive media coverage.

More info

AI Playability vs AI Protection



Harmeet Chagger –
Head of Digital and Innovation



Digital Culture Talks 2, photo: Joe Dawson

Last year I wrote an article exploring how artists are using AI and already 12 months later so much of the landscape has shifted.

While everyday folks and companies are using it - some with bold and brazen new corporate visions, others are experimenting with AI software and tools rather tentatively - akin to dipping a toe in the water of a cold swimming pool. Governments are very much focusing on AI cybersecurity, defence and the development of new innovation focused on the deeptech sectors. As this wave of AI hits knowledge workers and creatives, the CEO of Google's DeepMind, Demis Hassabias predicts that the most important skill that future generations will need is 'learning how to learn.'

Meanwhile, artists are still breaking the box and using AI to have critical and playful conversations about society, the future and the choices we make as our complex relationship with technology continues to evolve.

Some notable AI projects this year include: The Smartphone Orchestra's playfully collective AI experience Ancestors and CripShip, the roleplaying game where disability saves society from big tech by Joseph Wilk who was a part of the More Than AI Sandbox commissioned projects.

For me, there are so many questions, not just those centred around ethics and data use. We should be asking:

- *What is the impact of AI energy consumption vs the insane speed at which we can create and develop things?*
- *How are we adjusting for algorithmic bias?*
- *Who gets to use the tech, at whose profit and expense?*
- *How do we safeguard individuals who are falling prey to Large Language Model's persuasive nature?*
- *Should we allow tech to be placed in a position of trust, power and influence where it becomes our best friend, our confidante, or our counsel?*
- *Who and how will the AI silicon tech giants be held to account?*

We can't put AI back in the box, so as players, artists, makers, technologists, critical thinkers, everyday people and policymakers we must seek these answers.

How we're helping to tackle online harms



John White –
Chief Operating Officer

In recent years, we've sadly become used to parts of our social media landscape becoming increasingly hostile. In the cultual sector, staff tasked with managing social media communications can find themselves facing daily online abuse or at least needing to be far more circumspect about how they communicate and what topics are safe to share in public.

Since 2019, we've been working with cultural organisations and sector professionals on practical solutions to manage and even reduce the tide of abuse they face and to protect the wellbeing of their staff. This year, we've run free webinars for specific groups who are most impacted, whether this is museum staff trying to stop arguments escalating around potentially contentious items in their collection or librarians dealing with online abuse from vitriolic members of the public. We've also provided bespoke advice and training for some cultural organisations with significant public profiles, working with them to create policies and processes to robustly tackle bad public behaviour on their social channels.

Key findings from our Online Harms survey

75% organisations subjected to criticism online

30% experiencing wellbeing impact from online abuse

65% organisations are self-censoring

58% closed a social media channel due to abuse

In June, aware that the scale of the problem seemed to be growing, we surveyed cultural sector professionals about the trends they are encountering. From our respondents, 75% reported that their organisation had been subject to criticism online, 64% had blocked abusive comments and 30% reported that dealing with online criticism or abuse because of their work had negatively impacted their wellbeing. 65% of organisations are self-censoring, avoiding posting about certain topics to reduce the risk of abuse, while 58% have closed at least one of their social media channels because of the abusive content on it.

Given the scale of the problem, it was interesting to note that only a quarter had a public policy on how they respond to online abuse or an internal process for staff to monitor and moderate comments. Only 18% provided training to staff in this area. It was therefore perhaps not surprising that less than half of respondents felt confident that their organisation could manage risks relating to online abuse.

While this was a small survey, it is useful evidence to inform further research and policy work we're planning in this area. We will be collaborating with cultural organisations, university partners and those who continue daily to face online abuse simply for doing their jobs. We want to find better ways to turn this tide.

If you'd like to get involved or want practical advice to help your organisation, please get in touch.

We've also compiled some useful free online resources addressing this topic.

DIGITAL SPACES

The story so far...

At the start of 2025, we launched the Digital Spaces in Libraries programme in association with Arts Council England and the BFI to introduce a rich mix of virtual reality and community-driven digital content to nine library services across the UK.

It has three key stands: a tour around the nine-library network of VR headsets featuring licensed content, VR 180 masterclasses to enable community groups to create short immersive films and digital commissions.

Community VR 180 Films

Inspired by library staff and audiences, each service chose "people in places" stories to film in VR 180 which together form the beginnings of a new digital community archive, available through a new app, which allows viewers to see their communities reflected in fresh, creative ways.

VR Tour

The first cycle of the VR Library Tour reached over 3,500 users, with most libraries seeing more new visitors, many experiencing the library or VR for the first time. This shows real progress in making libraries places for digital discovery.

VIRTUAL REALITY LIBRARY



Digital Spaces 1 at Coventry Central Library, photo Hayley Salter

> *Trying VR at my local library was incredible - I got to experience worlds I'd never imagined and even brought my niece along, who loved it too!"*
>
> VR TOUR ATTENDEE

Creative Commissions

The participating libraries have also had funding and support to each create a new digital commission. These include:

Coventry Libraries | Soothing Sounds of the City
Immersive audio experience to support wellbeing.

Leeds Libraries | The Speaking Garden
Installations featuring projections and a new sound work exploring gardening, climate & community.

Inspire Libraries Nottinghamshire | Leaf Number 3
An animated VR short inspired by Sherwood Forest.

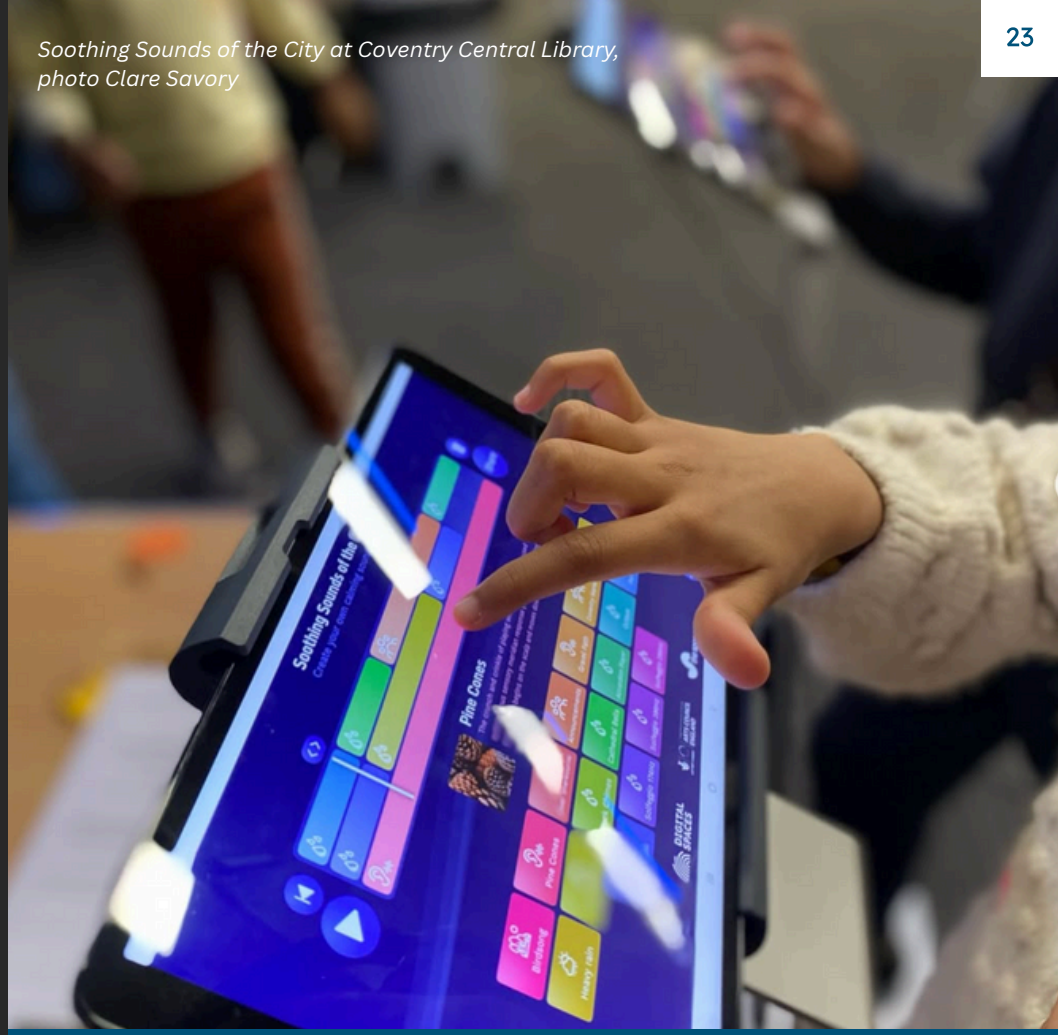
Newham Libraries | Threads of Home
A VR film celebrating the richness of South Asian culture through art, dress and storytelling.

Bradford Libraries | The Pulse of Bradford
A series of short VR films capturing the 'sounds of Bradford' by young poets.

Manchester Libraries | Rashford Mural Resource
A digital learning resource exploring the Marcus Rashford Mural Learning Resource, designed for school students and youth groups.

Somerset Libraries | Love Your Library
A digital video campaign celebrating the role of the library in local life.

Sunderland Libraries | Timepiece
A unique audio-visual 'time-keeping' installation for the atrium of Sunderland's new Culture House.



Soothing Sounds of the City at Coventry Central Library, photo Clare Savory

Digital Spaces continues until March 2026

Digital Culture Talks

Thinking digitally smart

Digital Culture Talks brings together artists, cultural leaders and technologists to explore how creativity can thrive in both physical and digital spaces.

Across two days of discussion, case studies and debate, we explore how new technologies are shaping audience experiences, opening up opportunities for collaboration, and reimagining the role of arts and culture in a digital-first world.

This year's event highlights inclusive practice, showcase innovative digital performance, and consider how global partnerships and emerging tools like AI can reshape creative future.

Wednesday 3 December – Expanding Access and Global Connections
10:30am – 4:00pm - Online

Register for Day 1

Thursday 4th December – Innovation, Performance & the Future of Digital Culture
In person at Phoenix Cinema and Arts Centre, Leicester
10:30am – 3:15pm

Register for Day 2



Thank you

The digital and broadcast commissioning opportunities and the free training and support that The Space provides are only made possible with funding from national and regional cultural development agencies and content commissioners.

We especially want to thank those who have provided funding for our activities in the period of this report: Arts Council England, BBC, BFI, Creative Scotland, The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Sky Arts.

We'd also like to thank the skills and development agencies, further and higher education providers and cultural organisations who help us ensure those participating in our programmes benefit from the broadest possible expertise.

And we could only deliver our activities in an agile and flexible manner with our UK-wide network of over 80 talented digital Associates.

Thank you all.

the space