

Outdoor Arts Sector Briefing Document

May 2025



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Arts uk

What is the Outdoor Arts sector?

- Outdoor Arts comprises of producers, festivals, artists, and commissioning organisations presenting artistic work in outdoor public spaces.
- The range of artforms includes dance, circus, theatre, carnival, and installation (visual arts or sound art).
- Most of our activities take place in public spaces as festivals (e.g. town centres) and are free-to-access for audiences.
- Outdoor Arts is a critical component of national celebration and commemoration such as London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, Commonwealth Games, 14-18 NOW, and the Royal Jubilee Celebrations.



Example Videos

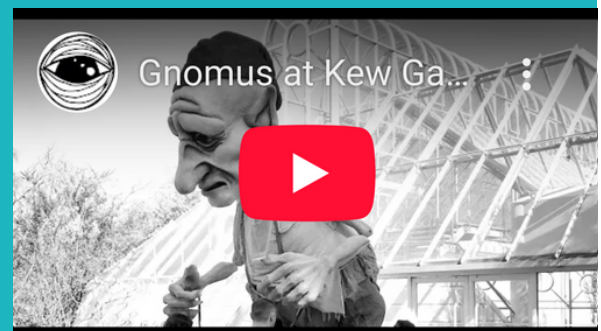
RISE - Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture

Creative team involving Lina Johansson (Mimbre Acrobatic Theatre) and 200 members of the local community.



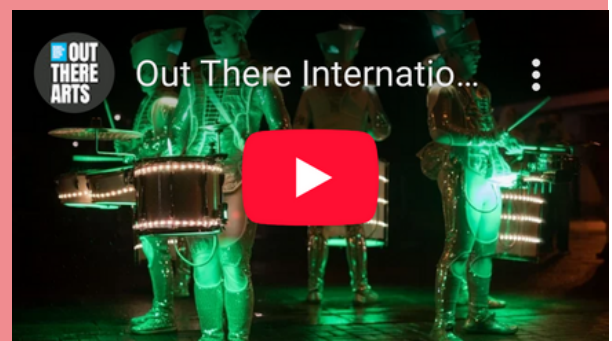
Gnomus by Puppets with Guts

A giant that performs and teaches about conservation.



Out There Arts Festival in Great Yarmouth

A range of shows and atmosphere of a typical street festival.



Durham Lumiere Festival

A winter time biennial festival.



Unique Selling Points of Our Sector

Outdoor Arts is a hugely cost-effective way of bringing about positive impact on the local economy, access to arts in diverse communities, and placemaking.

Economic Impact

The economic impact of **Freedom Festival 2024** was estimated to be **£1.8 million** to the city of Hull.

Milton Keynes International Festival delivered a positive economic impact to the city and generated **£6.7 million** in 2023 (MKIF is a biennale festival).

The impact report for **Stockton International Riverside Festival** estimates total direct economic impact for 2024 was **£949,626**.

Since its inception in 2009, investment from Durham County Council and Arts Council England into **Lumiere Festival** has brought:

- Over **1.3 million** visitors
- Generated more than **£43 million** in local economic impact
- Even in years affected by poor weather (2019), the event achieved a net impact of **£11.5 million** from a £1 million in combined public investment



Reaching diverse communities, dismantling economic and social barriers to arts participation at scale

- Most Outdoor Arts work is free-to-access, and many Arts Council funded projects take place in areas of low cultural engagement with diverse marginalised communities who have been historically underserved.
- Large-scale festivals such as Freedom Festival in Hull, Milton Keynes International Festival, and Out There Festival in Great Yarmouth attract tens of thousands of visitors and put on a range of world-class performances.

In 2024, Freedom Festival attracted 70,000 people

In 2024, Out There Festival attracted 65,000 people

In 2023, Milton Keynes International Festival attracted 56,000 (biennial)

- Outdoor Arts have a great track record of supporting artist role-models from diverse backgrounds, thanks to public subsidies from Arts Council England and Local Authorities.



Stopgap Dance Company is a troupe of disabled and non-disabled performers that has been working in the Outdoor Arts since 2008. Their previous outdoor show [Frock](#) toured to 19 cities across Europe in 2022 and was seen by 22,000 people.



Global Majority-led **Trigger** creates and produces bold and brave live events and major spectacles like [The Hatchling](#). Their work is accessible, inclusive and boundary pushing. Trigger's vision is brought to life by diverse teams of artists and community members, with a special focus on amplifying local voices.

Placemaking

- **Civic Pride**

Public spaces are our stages and our work animates and transforms these everyday places, creating an immediate sense of civic pride that indoor theatres cannot.

- **Driven by the Community**

A large bulk of people who help run our festivals are volunteers from the local community.

- **Participation Is Key**

Many of these festivals organise participatory projects like carnivals and parades for local children and families. They gain valuable experience of working alongside professional artists by making and presenting costumes, floats, music, dance, and puppets.



In 2023, the biennial Milton Keynes International Festival reached 56,000 audiences and 1,299 community participants. 99% said they will come to the next festival, 97% said the festival enhanced their pride for Milton Keynes, and 98% felt the festival had enhanced a sense of community in Milton Keynes.

It is important that these festivals receive long-term investment for the transformational impact of Outdoor Arts to take root. The aforementioned large-scale festivals have all built their profile as cultural hubs over 10-20+ years, and it required the festivals, artists, local people, funders and other supporters to work together to build a refreshed sense of place.

Current State of the Outdoor Arts Sector

Challenges

The Outdoor Arts sector is in crisis, with widespread cancellations, major programme cuts, and declining financial viability.

- Local Authorities, historically key funders, continue to make deep cuts - some festivals are operating on just 60% of their usual budget, while others have lost 100% of funding and have been cancelled altogether.
- At least one outdoor arts event has been cancelled each month over the past year due to lack of resources.
- Key events lost in 2024 include Birmingham International Dance Festival, Derby Festé, Leicester Carnival, and Bridgewater Quayside.
- 2024 saw major festivals like Stockton International Riverside Festival, Winchester Hat Fair, and Greenwich+Docklands International Festival having to significantly reduce their programme due to budget cuts.
- The sector's contraction is severely affecting the financial sustainability of independent artists and companies.
- These cuts negatively impact local economies, audience diversity, placemaking efforts, and talent retention.

Solutions

- **Establish Consultation Protocols Involving Key Players in Our Sector**

We call on Arts Council England, DCMS, Local Authorities and other bodies involved in policy making to establish a formal consultation process, which ensures fair consideration of all arts sectors (including Outdoor Arts) before public funds to national celebrations or nationwide relief funds are allocated (e.g. VE Day events and Arts Everywhere Fund, which resulted in minimal opportunities for our sector).

- **Ensure Inclusion in Policy and Funding Reviews**

The above protocol will also ensure that these institutions will include Outdoor Arts in future policy designs and reviews, recognising our importance in national and local cultural strategies and public engagement.

- **Ring-Fence Funding for Outdoor Arts**

We call on the above institutions to ring-fence and allocate a fair proportion of funds to Outdoor Arts within national and local cultural investment to reflect our social, cultural, and economic impact.

- **Expand Access to Theatre Tax Relief**

Theatre Tax Relief criteria must be amended to include non-ticketed, outdoor, and free-to-access performances. Read more about our position [here](#).

- **Adapt Alternative Finance Tools**

Redesign social impact loans and alternative finance schemes to suit the business models of free-to-access Outdoor Arts festivals.

- **Develop Support for Philanthropy and Sponsorship**

Involve Outdoor Arts festivals and our independent artists in ongoing consultation regarding philanthropic and corporate giving.

- **Promote Equitable Resourcing Models**

Create flexible less onerous funding mechanisms that result in faster access to funds. This will reflect the distinct operating realities of Outdoor Arts and enable broader access and sustainability, enabling us to make more immediate social and economic impact.

Image Credits

- *“The Air Between Us” by Rodney Bell and Chloe Loftus, photo: Oliver Crawford*
- *“The Wedding Party” by Nutkhut*
- *“Frock” by Stopgap Dance Company*
- *“The Hatchling” by Trigger, Wakefield, photo: JMA Photography*
- *“Colour The Castle” by Mr.Beam, Lumiere 2023, Durham, produced by Artichoke, photo: Matthew Andrews*
- *Kinetika and Jeanefer Jean Charles at T100 Festival 2022, Tilbury*