

Arts for All: Tackling Barriers to Arts and Cultural Participation in London



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Rob Anderson and Daniel Reast

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About the Authors

Rob Anderson

Rob is Research Director at the Centre for London. Rob joined from the Centre for Homelessness Impact where, as Director of Knowledge Implementation, he worked to transform the use of evidence and data in local and national government to end homelessness faster across the UK.

Rob has worked across several government departments, including HM Treasury. Prior to working in government, Rob worked for charities tackling social injustice across London. Rob holds a BA Hons from the University of Oxford where he was a Craythorne Scholar and an MSc in Inequalities and Social Science from the London School of Economics.

Daniel Reast

Daniel is Research Officer at the Centre for London. He joined in September 2024 from LCA where he worked as a member of its Insight team. Before joining the Centre, Daniel worked as a senior researcher for a policy conference production company, as well as a freelance writer and journalist. His writing credits include Metro, the Independent, Big Issue, and Daily Mirror. He has comprehensive insight and interest in political geography, local government and the built environment. Daniel holds a Masters of Research (MRes) in History, and BA (Hons) in History and Politics, both from the University of Portsmouth.

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Finally, thanks also go to our colleagues at Centre for London - particularly Jon Tabbush, who started this project, and Antonia Jennings, who chaired the Advisory Group.

Foreword

London is a global cultural superpower, rich in talent, heritage, and creativity. Yet, as this report shows, for many Londoners, access to arts and culture is far from equitable.

Despite London's status as a powerhouse of global culture, many residents face barriers to participation, from cost, safety, and travel, to deeper issues of representation and inclusion. These barriers are not insurmountable, but they require coordinated action. BIDs, at their heart, are partnership builders and that is exactly what is needed now; collective effort across institutions, communities, businesses, and policymakers to ensure that all Londoners can benefit from the extraordinary cultural life of their city.

The Culture Mile BID is proud to have supported this important independent research, in partnership with the Greater London Authority, shining a light on the barriers Londoners face when engaging with culture across the capital. As the only Business Improvement District (BID) in London with culture at its core, we are uniquely placed to examine these questions and consider how different sectors might work together to address them.

This report seeks not only to unearth the reasons for low engagement but also to offer a framework for practical, collaborative solutions. By working together, cultural institutions, BIDs, local authorities, and communities, can forge new pathways to participation, ensuring that arts and culture are not just the pride of London but a shared experience for everyone.

To ensure this report reflects a broad and diverse range of voices, we have worked closely with Centre for London, who have conducted the research and published the report. Together, we have engaged with Londoners from many different backgrounds and consulted with leading figures across DCMS, Arts Council England, local government, cultural institutions, youth organisations, and more.

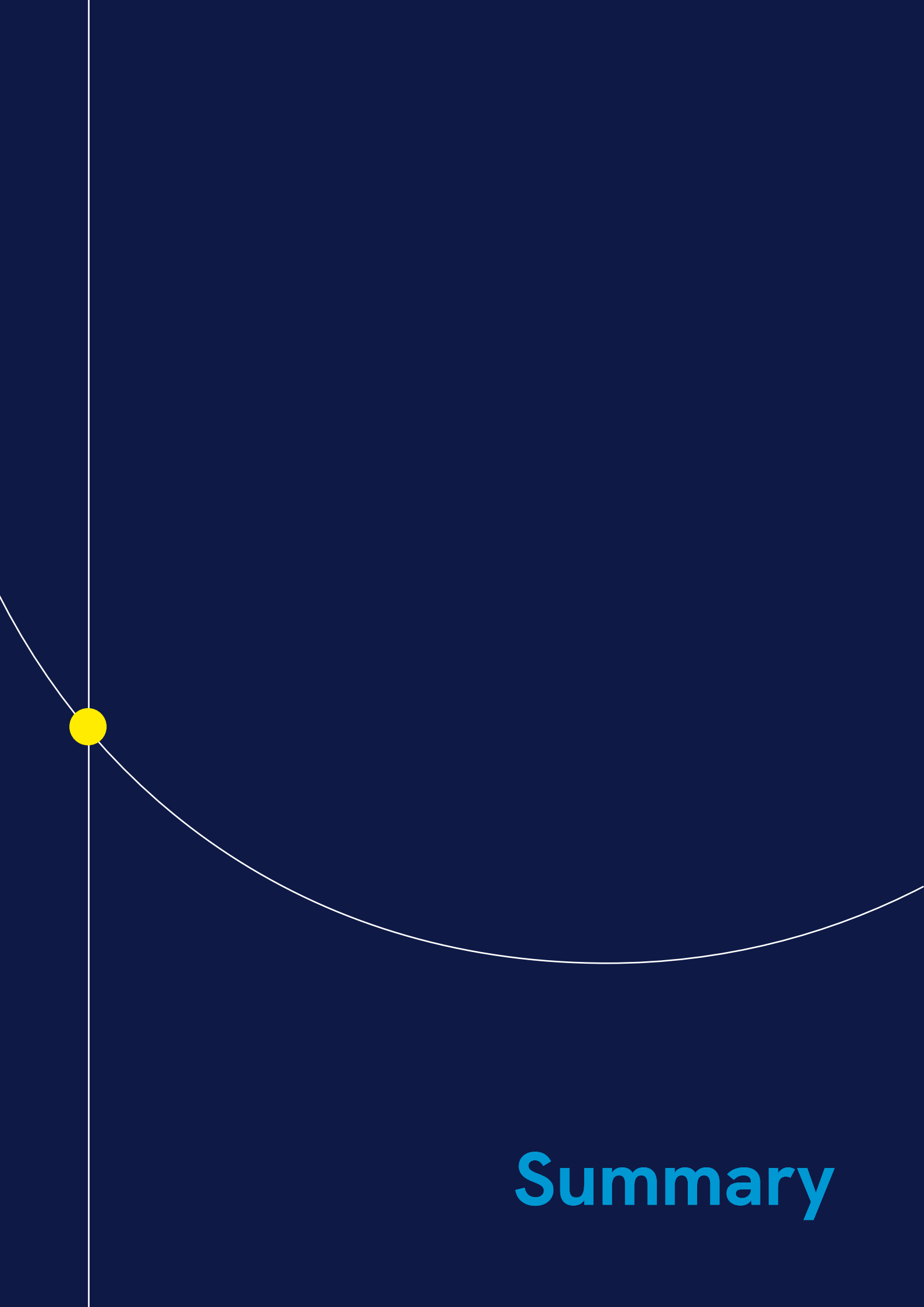
Our thanks go to Centre for London for their diligent work in creating this report, to the GLA for their support and to all our partners who have consulted on this project.

We invite you to read, reflect, and join us in building a truly inclusive cultural future for Londoners.

Austin Casey, CEO, The Culture Mile

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Summary

The Mayor of London and Westminster are politically aligned for the first time in nine years. Now is the time to lean into London's strengths as a global cultural superpower.

Despite its status as a cultural powerhouse, there are large disparities in engagement with arts and culture across the city's geographies and communities, with some parts of the city seeing some of the lowest levels of engagement in arts and culture in the country.

Fresh policy is needed to cement London's cultural success and ensure its citizens reap the benefit.

London is one of the world's greatest cultural capitals. Home to more than 1,000 art galleries and museums, Europe's largest live comedy scene, historic music venues, and a world-famous West End, the 'Unreal City' as described by T.S. Elliot is a powerhouse for creativity and cultural life nationally and internationally.

Arts, culture, and the wider creative industries are London's third largest export, contributing 12.9% of London's economy in 2019.¹ Public spending on culture in London in 2019-20 totalled £800m, or around 27% of England's total culture spending at £2.9bn.

Despite this status as a global cultural powerhouse, the experience of many of the city's own residents is far from that of the millions of tourists each year. Physical engagement with arts and culture in London sits below or close to the national average, and there are large geographic inequalities in engagement across the city, with some boroughs amongst the least engaged nationally. Londoners are, however, much more likely than people in other regions to engage with arts and culture online.

London's diverse demographics and communities engage in arts and culture with different types of arts and culture, and to differing extents. Londoners from diverse backgrounds are more likely to engage in the wide range of cultural experiences which the capital has to offer, but this varies across different demographics. Younger Londoners are more likely to engage in almost all forms of arts and culture, with the exception of plays, drama, pantomime, ballet or opera. Londoners from managerial and professional backgrounds are much more likely to engage in arts and culture overall than those in manual occupations. In terms of ethnicity, Londoners from Ethnic Minority backgrounds are more likely to engage in arts and culture overall, but White Londoners were generally more likely to attend museums and galleries.

There are important differences in how Londoners from different communities and demographics hear about arts and culture. Older Londoners aged 55 and above are much more likely to hear about arts and cultural events through word of mouth than younger Londoners, and are also more likely to hear about arts and cultural events through print media or from

local television, radio or podcasts. By contrast, younger Londoners are more likely to hear about arts and culture through social media, with around half of Londoners aged 54 and using social media to find out about arts and cultural events compared to just 28% of those aged 55 and above. Londoners from an Ethnic Minority Background were also much more likely to hear about arts and cultural events through social media, with more than half doing so, compared to around a third of White Londoners.

Cost is the most significant barrier to greater engagement for the majority of arts and cultural events, with lack of time a barrier for some such as museums or galleries. Londoners feel that some forms of arts and cultural engagement are more affordable than others, but no forms of arts and cultural activity are perceived universally as affordable. Ticket price is a particularly important consideration for older Londoners, while younger Londoners aged 54 and below are more likely to consider the cost of travel an important factor when attending an event.

While cost is key for most Londoners, there are some important differences between London's diverse communities and demographics in the factors they consider when deciding to engage in arts and culture. Women and younger Londoners are significantly more likely to consider safety and/or security measures among the most important factors when deciding to attend events. Londoners from an Ethnic Minority background are much more likely to feel that arts and cultural events are 'not for people like me' or to prefer other types of cultural activity. However, 72% of Londoners, including 75% of Londoners from Ethnic Minority backgrounds, feel that London's arts and cultural scene is representative of London's diverse population and communities, and represents a diversity of arts and cultural events.



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A majority of Londoners feel that reducing the cost of admission would make them more likely to attend arts and cultural events. However, this may not be as straightforward a solution as it may seem. Our analysis highlights that Londoners have mixed opinions on which arts and cultural events the Government could prioritise to make cheaper. Also, discounted tickets aimed at widening participation may just end up reducing the cost of attendance for people who would have attended anyway – ‘dead-weight’ in policy terms, and potentially inequitable. This aside, there is ample evidence – such as the legacy of the move to make national museums free in 2001 – that universal free arts and cultural events substantially increase footfall and are likely to have indirect effects on other barriers to participation in arts and culture, such as lack of familiarity with cultural institutions and venues.

Practical issues other than the price of admission such as travel costs, safety and security are particular barriers for a substantial minority of Londoners. The reliability, frequency and cost of public transport particularly matter for younger Londoners, while Londoners from an Ethnic Minority background are significantly more likely to feel that increased safety measures would encourage them to attend more arts and cultural events, with almost a quarter doing so (24%). Accessibility issues that may be faced by disabled people wishing to participate in arts and culture, with evidence showing that genuinely inclusive user-led design can improve access and hence engagement for disabled audiences.

Almost a third of Londoners (30%) rated functional barriers such as a need for more local events at more convenient times amongst the most important things that would increase their participation in arts and culture. Initiatives such as the London Borough of Culture provide strong examples of widening participation both by decentering Central London as the home of London’s arts and cultural scene (not having to ‘go into town’ for culture) but also by cultivating diverse arts and cultural activity outside of established areas such as local town centres. However, people are willing to travel to participate in arts and culture, especially for ‘destination’ or ‘treat’ outings, and there is an important role for arts and cultural institutions in place-making to encourage such destination-based behaviours. Research carried out through the GLA’s Talk London survey platform found a variety of different reasons for low participation or access to arts and culture, with cost regularly cited as a challenge across different age groups.

The Mayor of London continues to play an important role in tackling functional barriers such as lack of availability of culture in parts of the city by championing arts and culture and initiatives to widen engagement and participation. Our research highlighted the impact of successive Mayors in championing London’s cultural life as part of major programmes – such as the centrality of flagship cultural and educational institutions in the 2012 Olympic programme and specific policy interventions such as the Borough of Culture in unlocking resources and spurring cultural activity at the local level.

While fewer Londoners explicitly named attitudinal barriers such as feeling like arts and cultural events ‘aren’t for people like me’ as the key barrier, attitudinal barriers may sit at the heart of many of inequalities in arts and culture participation in the capital. Childhood exposure to the arts can have a powerful effect on later behaviour in terms of ongoing engagement with the arts, and Londoners strongly support the role of education in cultural engagement, with more than a quarter (28%) saying that additional public funding to improve London’s cultural offer should be channelled into youth and educational programmes. Also, a lack of diversity among those producing culture is a known driver of the gap between the kinds of arts and cultural offer that would be engaging for Ethnic Minority audiences and the mainstream offer. Younger Londoners also feel strongly that cultural programming and curatorial approaches amongst London’s arts and cultural institutions need to reflect Londoners’ themselves.



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However, most Londoners feel that London's arts and cultural scene is representative of London's diverse population and communities and represents a diversity of arts and cultural events. 72% of Londoners felt that the capital's arts and cultural scene is either very representative or somewhat representative of London's population and communities, with 71% feeling it is very or somewhat representative of a diversity of arts and cultural interests.

Overall, we find that that practical issues like cost and convenience are of paramount importance when thinking about how to encourage wider engagement with arts and culture in London. However, efforts to tackle them must go beyond simply addressing practical issues. Practical, attitudinal and functional barriers to engagement with culture interact with and reinforce one another, and tackling the more apparent or intuitive barriers – often practical – may not help as much as we might expect. Initiatives to increase engagement and access to arts and culture must successfully address how barriers cross-cut and feed into one another; this will minimise dead-weight and, crucially, create positive feedback loops.

We drew on insights from two advisory groups and a series of interviews with practitioners and experts in London's arts and cultural scene in which we explored their perceptions of the barriers to engagement and how these could be overcome. We propose the following recommendations to help ensure that more Londoners can reap the benefits of London's world-class cultural offer:

Recommendations for national government

1. Introduce a national Arts Pass for U-25s to ensure every young person regardless of background can enjoy the best of London and the UK's arts and culture scene.

Enabling access and engagement with arts and culture at a younger age is crucial for supporting creativity, critical thinking and with arts and culture longer-term. The Government should consider the development of a new Arts Pass for all under-25s to reduce the cost of attending cultural events for all young people to ensure access for all, regardless of background.

2. Promote the value of the Arts in the national core curriculum to nurture future talent and ensure equality of access to arts and culture.

Successive changes to the curriculum implemented since the 1980s has neglected the arts as an essential part of children and young people's educational development. Art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts should form a core part of the education system to ensure every child receives a strong base of knowledge and experience in the arts, both as an investment in the future creative economy and as an intrinsic good to enable more young people to experience the broad range of culture London and the UK has to offer.

3. Restore arts funding to local government to 2010 levels and invest in Arts Council England funding for London to kick-start growth and increase inclusivity.

Dedicated funding for arts and culture programmes in London's local government and investment in London's world-leading arts and cultural scene through an uplift to Arts Council England funding would have direct benefits for the arts ecosystem nationally, as well as driving the government's mission of kick-starting economic growth. It will also enable better engagement with communities often left out of the capital's cultural scene, with local government and London's institutions more able to resource local arts organisations and bring communities into the design and delivery of local cultural programming.

4. Allow the Greater London Authority to explore the implementation of a Tourist Tax to help invest in London's arts and cultural scene.

The global appeal of London's destination economy is much down to London's passionate and hardworking cultural workforce, working hand in hand with international talent. London's local government should be able to reinvest the fruits of these efforts, not just for the benefit of Londoners themselves, but for the wider economy too.

Recommendations for regional and local government

1. Ensure arts and culture are at the heart of implementing the London Growth Plan's vision to build a fairer, safer, greener and more prosperous London.

It is very positive that the new London Growth Plan commits to maintaining London's global cultural status and foregrounds the importance of investing in culture as a key driver of the experience economy and visitor destinations that are critical to London's economic growth. It's important that the implementation of this vision also helps deliver the commitment at the heart of the Mayor's 2018 Culture Strategy that every Londoner deserves the chance to enrich their lives through culture; for example, by ensuring that the upcoming Inclusive Talent Strategy helps more Londoners, particularly those from culturally excluded backgrounds, access and succeed in the city's arts and cultural sector.

2. Reinvigorate local authority culture strategies to plan for the long term to foster local cultural activity.

Initiatives such as the London Borough of Culture have shown the strengths and ingenuity of cultural programmes at a local level and the benefits they can bring over the long-term. London's local authorities should commit to providing a long-term programme of arts and culture through reviewing and implementing a culture strategy devised in partnership with local communities, arts practitioners, and institutions.



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Recommendations for institutions

1. The Arts Council should build on their Cultural Compacts model to deeply engage with and respond to the priorities and preferences of local organisations and communities.

As an arms-length organisation of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England works closely with London's local and regional governments and supports structures that build local cultural capacity and has targeted much-needed investment in some of the London boroughs with the lowest participation in arts and culture.

To go further and ensure that funding and investment decisions are led by the priorities and preferences of London's local organisations and communities, the Arts Council should consider establishing local partnerships which centre local arts and community organisations and have the autonomy and resources to engage deeply with local communities and invest for the long-term. This could build on the Cultural Compacts model and allow for a closer, deeper and cooperative relationship between funders and local creative organisations and other partners.

2. Institutions should work hand-in-hand with communities so that cultural programming reflects London's diverse audiences, especially those least represented in the arts and cultural sector.

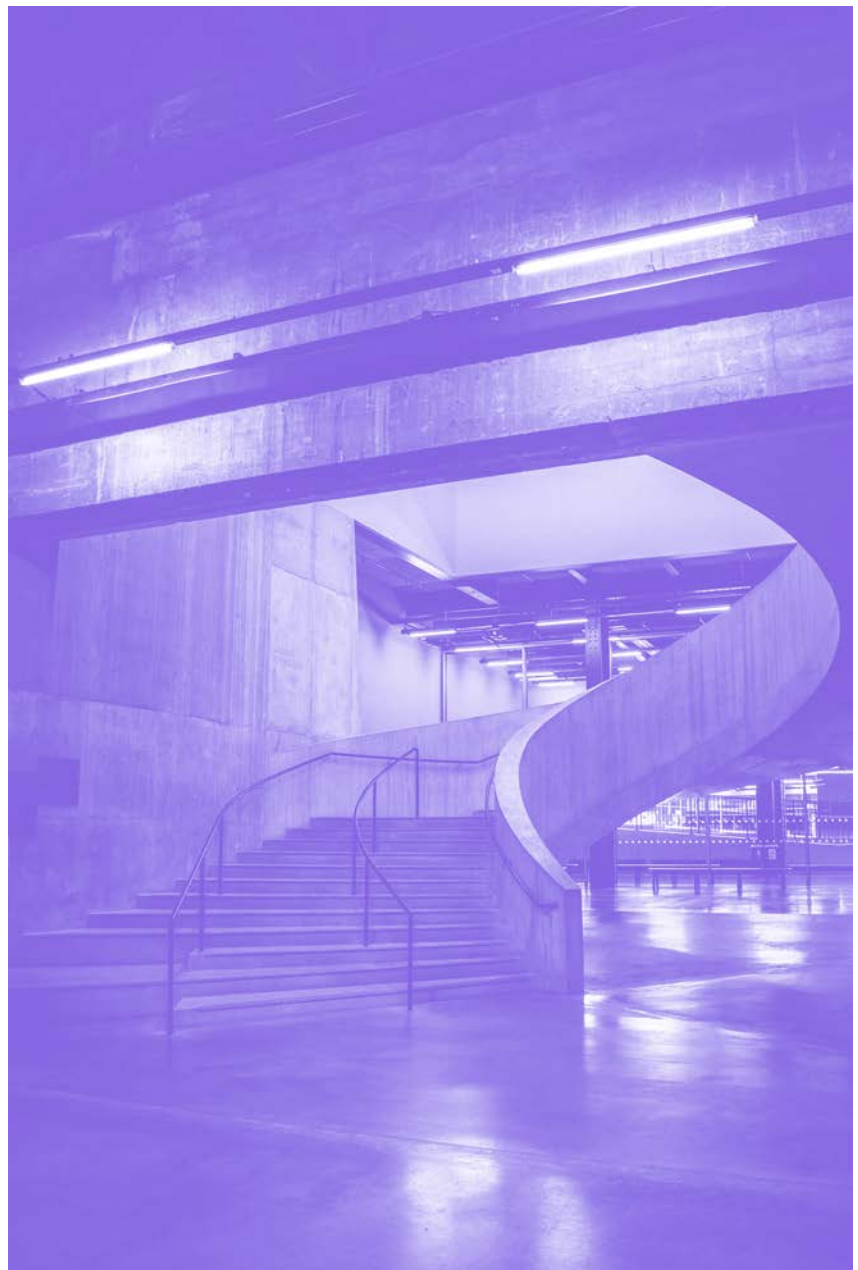
Too many Londoners, particularly those from more marginalised backgrounds, do not see themselves in the world-class cultural institutions the city is home to. Major institutions should leverage their resources and reputation to work hand-in-hand with local residents to create novel, high-quality and popular programming. This should become the norm rather than the exception for all arts and culture institutions.

3. Institutions and their partners should act as champions and enablers for local and grassroots organisations in order to reach Londoners who are most marginalised from the arts.

London's major arts and cultural institutions are decades or even centuries old. Their success and longevity are integral to London's arts and culture sector, and today work hand-in-hand with London's businesses, local governments, and civil society organisations to deliver world-class arts offerings. Institutions should work with their place-based partners, such as London's BIDs, to collaborate with long-standing grassroots and community organisations through convening, place-making and resource-sharing to enable organisations and creators to thrive in their local communities.

4. **Arts organisations should take an audience-first approach, using data, insight and collaboration to more effectively reach and engage diverse audiences.**

Our analysis highlights how audiences increasingly find out about arts and cultural offerings through diverse channels which vary significantly across London's various communities and demographics. There is an opportunity to leverage consumer insights about where different audiences get their information and select channels and tailor promotional content to best engage them, especially amongst those less likely to engage, and for cross-promotion to maximise awareness and engagement.



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Chapter 1

Arts and culture in London



Arts and culture in London

London as a cultural hub

London is one of the world's greatest cultural capitals. Home to more than 1,000 art galleries and museums, Europe's largest live comedy scene, historic music venues, and an inherent energy of live performance, the 'Unreal City' as described by T.S. Elliot is a powerhouse for creativity and cultural life nationally and internationally.

Cultural institutions in London are largely clustered into Central London's dense neighbourhoods, each with a centuries-long cultural heritage. The capital's oldest museum, the British Museum (founded in 1753) sits nestled in the heart of Camden's cultural quarter, connected to the West End and a network of theatres, galleries and attractions, while the Barbican Arts Centre (founded in 1982) is at the core of the City of London. This central hub extends outwards to more dispersed but nonetheless vital cultural centres at East Bank, Greenwich, Hammersmith, Wimbledon and many more.

The Mayor of London's 2018 Culture Strategy 'Culture for All Londoners'² aimed to refocus cultural investment, engagement and participation across the capital, instead of being mainly expressed in Central London. This strategy aimed to spread the social and economic benefits of London's arts and culture scene 'on their [Londoners] doorstep.' This has led to several policies for spreading arts and culture across London including the Borough of Culture programme³, Creative Enterprise Zones⁴, and the post-pandemic campaign through London & Partners, 'Let's Do London' which generated £81m for London's economy in 2021⁵.

The value of arts and culture

Arts, culture, and the wider creative industries are London's third largest export, contributing 12.9% of London's economic output in 2019 and behind finance and real estate on 17.4% and 14.3% respectively.⁶ Public spending on culture in 2019-20 totalled £800m, or around 27% of England's total culture spending at £2.9bn.

Furthermore, London has a higher proportion of public spending on arts and culture compared to England at 0.8% to 0.5% respectively. This public spending also generated a high proportion of tax income to the Exchequer, contributing £13bn in taxes on profits, business rates and earnings in 2019-20, or 8% of London's total tax receipts.⁷

The density of cultural and creative industries in London has enabled a higher productivity rate for the sector compared to the wider national economy, at 46% more productive, while the productivity level of the sector in London was 15% higher than the whole London economy.⁸ Before the pandemic, London capitalised on its cultural strengths and saw these industries grow faster than in Britain as a whole. The size of London's creative economy grew by 5.2% between 2010-19 compared to 4.1% for Britain. Similarly, annual job growth in the creative sectors was 3.3% for London between 2015-19, higher than the national average of 2.5%.⁹

"I live in London primarily because of its diversity and rich cultural scene. London offers a great array of free arts and culture options, but things that cost usually cost a lot."

35-YEAR-OLD woman, Camden.

Recent estimates from 2023 suggest London's total workforce in arts, entertainment and recreation businesses stands at 189,000 people, of which 62,500 work in Central London boroughs.¹⁰ These employees work in more than 43,000 individual businesses across the capital. London's thriving arts and culture scene has been disproportionately hit by economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, public funding constraints, and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis. Between 2010 and 2020-21, total local authority spending per head nationally is estimated to have fallen by around 50%.¹¹ More recently, the 2021 Spending Review committed to spending any increase in Arts Council England funding at outside of London,¹² with Arts Council investment in National Portfolio Organisations across London combined not rising in the 23-26 funding round. Data from Arts Council England highlights that, despite overall investment in London being flat while rising overall nationally, 53 London organisations received an increase in portfolio-on-portfolio investment of over 5% or more between 22/23 and 23/24 versus. However, 24 organisations received a decrease in investment of more than 5% between 22/23 and 23/24.

As a result of the pandemic, the number of jobs in the cultural and creative industries fell year-on-year by 7.1% between 2019-20. This was especially severe for London's museums where the sub-sector lost more than a quarter, or 26.5%, of its employees in the space of a year.¹³ Overall, London's hub of arts and culture in the Central Activities Zone (CAZ) experienced a £10.9bn loss from consumer spending on tourism in 2020, along with a £1.9bn loss from commuters – at a combined £12.8bn, this is higher than the entire local government baseline budget for England in 2024-25¹⁴ and represents a significant loss of income to London's arts and culture sector.

But the value of London's arts and culture sector is part of a wider ecosystem of civic and consumer engagement which extends beyond the boundaries of Greater London. With £10m generated every hour by London's cultural and creative industries, the sector's benefits extend across the South East, due to the capital's high connectivity through rail and road.¹⁵ Furthermore, a 2015 study identified the parallel impacts of how arts and culture can improve local economies and population outcomes, including the improvement of residual productivity through greater access to art and culture particularly for children and young people.¹⁶ Arts and culture also has a demonstrable effect on economic regeneration which improves employment outcomes.¹⁷ In London, this has been demonstrated through arts-led regeneration projects at East Bank, Bankside, Hoxton and Brentford.

Indeed, when asked in a 2016 survey which of a list of 15 things is their favourite thing about living in London, 32% of respondents selected art and culture, making it the second most popular choice (behind history).¹⁸ In economic terms, a survey from November 2024 recorded 51% of UK respondents valuing arts and creative industries as important to the British economy, compared to 35% as not important.¹⁹

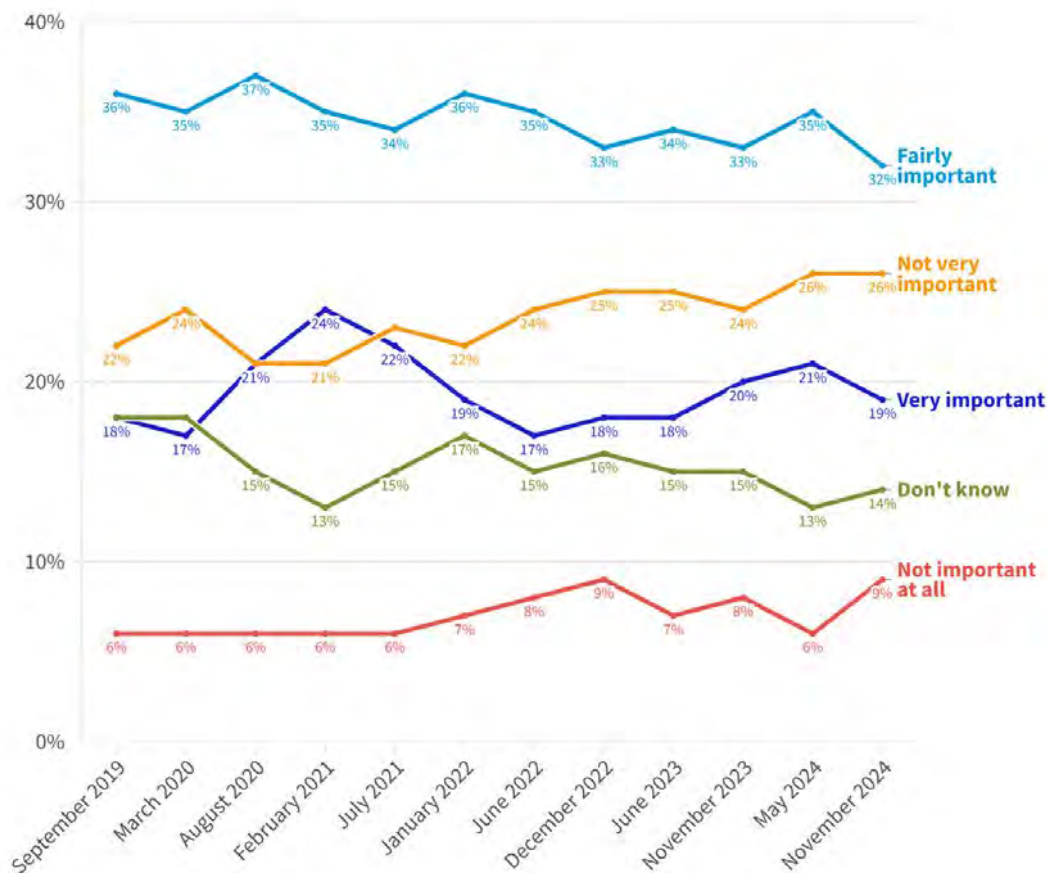
"I think culture is very important for London cohesion. It is a concern to me that 'Outer London' does not get involved in cultural activities."

76 year-old man, Haringey

A critical moment for arts and culture in London

This work takes places at a critical moment in the political cycle. With the new Government in Westminster committed to economic growth and a renewed mandate for London's Mayor who has recently launched the London Growth Plan with London's cultural sector at the heart of the economic vision for the city, there is a clear opportunity to lean into London's strengths as a global cultural superpower and the prosperity and 'soft power' it brings, both to London and the wider UK. Beyond its substantial economic potential, the value of investment in arts and culture produces public policy dividends, supporting wellbeing, creativity and social connection.²⁰

Figure 1: How important is arts and creative industries to the British economy?



Source: YouGov, Atys and Creative Industries tracker 2019-24

Without fresh policy which seeks to cement London's cultural success and ensure its citizens reap the benefits, this opportunity will be missed.

At the same time, London's culture sector faces significant challenges – the triple shock of Brexit, Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis have left their mark.

Also, despite London's status as a cultural powerhouse, the experience of many of the city's own residents is far from that of the millions of tourists each year. Engagement with arts and culture varies dramatically across the city's geographies and communities, with some parts of the city seeing some of the lowest levels of engagement in arts and culture in the country.

2025 is a significant year for culture in London with Wandsworth taking on the mantle of the Mayor's Borough of Culture, the Government's independent review of Arts Council England, as well as its new Visitor Economy Advisory Council and Creative Industries Taskforce, plus two new major arts venues opening in the capital at Sadler's Wells East and the V&A East Museum and Storehouse, both at East Bank. In this historic year, it's vital that London's arts and culture is representing and benefitting the city in which it is made.

That is why this research project seeks to assess the state of participation in arts and culture in London today and identify what can be done to safeguard London's continued cultural success and ensure that more Londoners benefit from the city's world-class offer. We analyse the latest statistics on arts and cultural engagement in the capital, draw on insights from recent polling data on Londoners' perceptions of arts and culture. We also summarise insights from expert cultural practitioners from London's diverse arts and culture scene and explore what the city can learn from existing and historical efforts to increase engagement with arts and culture.

"I miss smaller shows at the theatre but finding them is becoming more difficult. Creative, new shows are hard to find. London needs this creativity. It needs a fringe like in Edinburgh."

53 year-old man, Bromley

A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

The study and classification of arts and culture is complex and ever-evolving. Since Plato hypothesised the 'corrupting'²¹ nature of art on humanity, philosophers have sought to classify the materials of arts and culture and their effects on society.

With the decline of historical categories of 'high' versus 'low' culture which primarily distinguished arts and cultural activities by the class status of audiences (i.e. opera for the upper class, television for the masses), arts and culture engagement today is more often defined in terms of activity. For example, tangible activities in specific venues, such as going to the theatre or visiting an arts centre, are sometimes referred to as 'Formal arts engagement' while more intangible experiences, integrated into daily activities and venues such as street art, public dance & musical performances, are sometimes considered informal. Such approaches to classifying activities sometimes also includes a third category: non-formal, which describes arts and culture engagement supplementary to formal activities, such as dance classes, workshops or personal enrichment.

There are also typologies which describe the method of consumption, rather than setting or activity. Active engagement involves activities with direct involvement or response, such as attending a theatre show or music gig. This is also sometimes referred to as 'meaningful' engagement for its potential to generate greater retention of the art form. Passive engagement is the exposure to arts and culture without enabled participation, where individuals consume without actively seeking to pursue an outcome. Digital consumption of arts and culture has made passive engagement more complex to measure, while creative engagement refers to personal participation in arts and culture through individual enrichment such as arts and crafts, reading and writing poetry.

For this study, we have limited our typology to refer to the physical or digital engagement with specific arts and cultural events, rather than an expansive definition to include personal activities or non-formal enrichment. This is primarily for the purposes of quantitative analysis, where we are reliant on official statistics collected by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in its annual Participation Survey.²² This separates physical and digital engagement apart from personal activities, reflecting both the cultural value of this engagement with its economic function. This said, we recognise that culture reflects a broad range of activities and that any simplification may lose subjective nuances in individual and community engagement with arts and culture.

Methodology

We undertook a rapid review of the literature on arts and cultural participation in the UK and London as well as analysing range of secondary data sources to understand the context and evidence on London's arts and cultural sector and the key barriers and enablers of engagement.

To analyse how Londoners participate in arts and culture today, we analysed official statistics collected by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in its annual Participation Survey.

We also analysed data from a survey conducted by Savanta of 1,579 Londoners aged 18+ online on 21-26 June. Data were weighted to be representative of all Londoners aged 18+ by age, sex, London region, SEG, ethnicity, 2024 London Mayoral vote and 2019 General Election vote. Savanta is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Statistical significance testing was conducted on polling results, and this is reported throughout.

We also drew qualitative insights from a discussion held by City Hall's online community TalkLondon, entitled Your cultural life in London. The discussion ran from 05 June 2024 - 21 July 2024, with participants invited to share their perspectives on the following questions:

- What, if anything, would encourage you to experience arts and culture more often in London?
- What arts and cultural experiences do you wish were more readily available in your area?
- How do you usually find out about cultural experiences? Where do you look for them?
- What has been your best experience with arts and culture in London, and why?

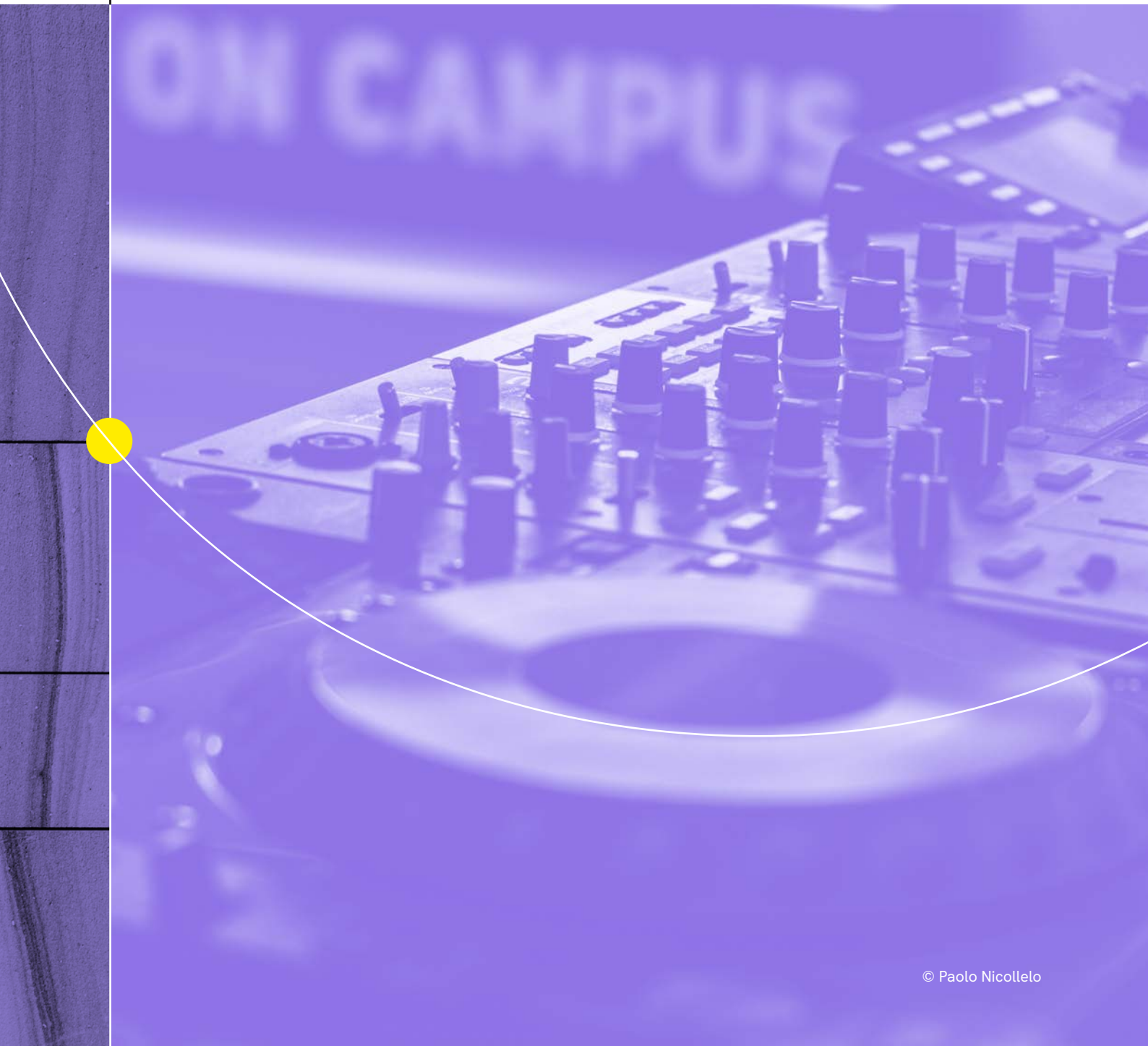
To refine our analysis of these data and develop our recommendations, we hosted two advisory groups and conducted a series of interviews with practitioners and experts in London's arts and cultural scene in which we explored their perceptions of the barriers to engagement and how these could be overcome.



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Chapter 2

Participation in Arts and Culture in London today



This chapter explores the latest data on participation in arts and culture amongst Londoners today.

How does London compare to the rest of England?

Despite its world-class cultural offering, physical engagement with arts and culture in London sits around the national average.

Between April 2022 to March 2024, 90% of Londoners engaged with the arts in person in the last 12 months. This is line with national average (90%), but lower than the most engaged regions of the wider South East (92%) and South West (93%).

Londoners are much more likely than people in other regions to engage with arts and culture online.

Between April 2022 to March 2024, 38% of Londoners engaged with the arts online in the last 12 months, considerably above the national average of 34% and the highest of any region in England.

Many central London cultural activities are expensive and as a retired person it is easier to go to more local events. Having to do everything digitally can be a deterrent.

35-YEAR-OLD woman, Camden.

Figure 2: Physical engagement with the arts in the last 12 months, April 2022 to March 2024
England regions (average)



Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Participation Survey: April 2022 to March 2024 • Engaged with the arts physically (attended an event or participated in an activity in person)

Figure 3: Digital engagement with the arts in the last 12 months, April 2022 to March 2024
England regions (average)



Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Participation Survey: April 2022 to March 2024 • Engaged with the arts digitally (creative and cultural activities done online)

There are large geographic inequalities in engagement in arts and culture in-person across the city, with some boroughs amongst the least engaged nationally

People living in Inner London are more likely to engage with the arts in person than the national average, with 91% of people having engaged with the arts in person over the last 12 months. People in Outer London were slightly less likely to have engaged with arts and culture in person, with 89% having done so in the last 12 months, with the lowest levels of engagement seen in Outer West and North West London (89%) and Outer East and North East London (87%).

These relatively small regional differences disguise much more significant variations at the borough level. Some local authorities, such as the City of London (97%) and Richmond Upon Thames (96%), saw rates of physical engagement in arts and culture amongst the highest in the country. In contrast, some boroughs, particularly in the East of the city, see very low rates of engagement. For example, in Barking and Dagenham in Outer East London, just 83% of people engaged with arts and culture physically over the last 12 months, the sixth lowest level of engagement of any local authority in England.

Figure 4: Physical engagement with the arts in the last 12 months, April 2022 to March 2024

London sub-regions (average)

87% 93%



Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Participation Survey: April 2022 to March 2024 • Engaged with the arts physically (attended an event or participated in an activity in person)

Figure 5: Physical engagement with the arts in the last 12 months, April 2022 to March 2024

London boroughs (average)

83% 97%



Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Participation Survey: April 2022 to March 2024 • Engaged with the arts physically (attended an event or participated in an activity in person)

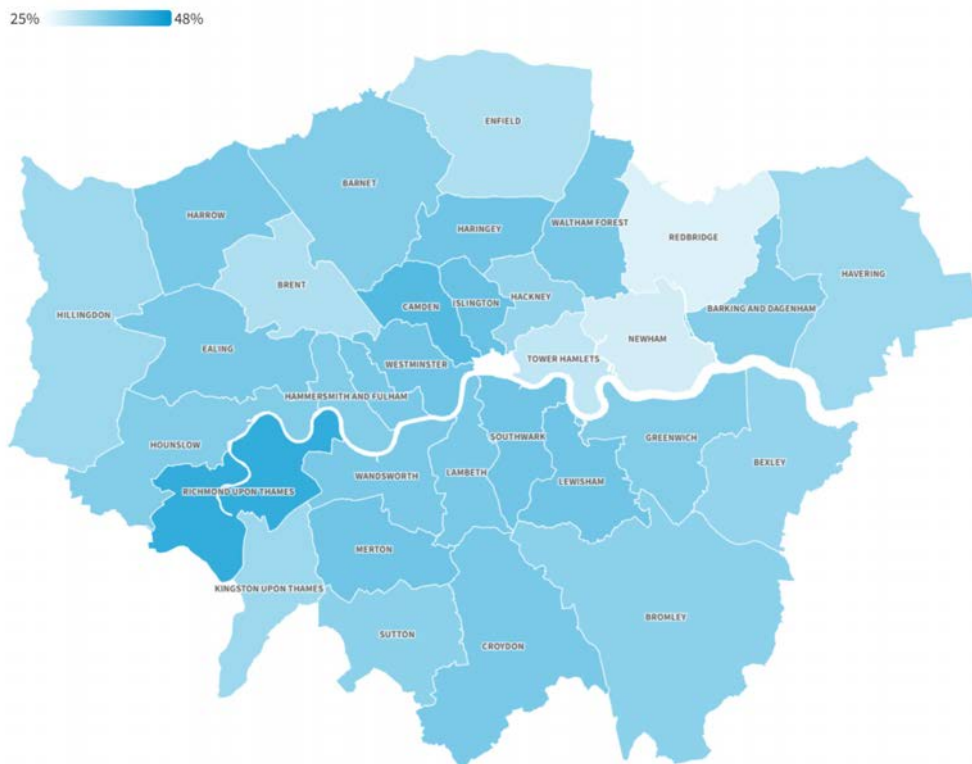
Outer Londoners are more likely to engage in arts and culture online than those in Inner London, but there are large variations at the borough level.

All sub-regions of London saw substantially higher engagement in arts and culture online than the national average, with people living in Outer London reporting slightly higher rates of engagement online (39%) than those living in Inner London (38%). People living in outer East London, as well as being the least likely to engage with arts and culture in person, were least likely to engage online, with 36% of people reporting having engaged with arts and culture online over the last 12 months – notably, this is still above the national average of 34%.

At the borough level, disparities in online engagement in arts and culture are substantial and even greater than the differences in physical engagement in arts and culture. Almost half (48%) of people in Richmond Upon Thames have engaged in arts and culture online over the last 12 months, almost twice the rate in the lowest engagement boroughs, City of London (25%) and Redbridge (28%).

Figure 6: Digital engagement with the arts in the last 12 months, April 2022 to March 2024

London boroughs (average)



Source: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Participation Survey: April 2022 to March 2024 • Engaged with the arts digitally (creative and cultural activities done online)

“London is vast and travel from outer boroughs like Bromley is long and exhausting... I find myself having to travel to other boroughs who are more fortunate with cultural provision and workshops... This isn’t great or equitable.”

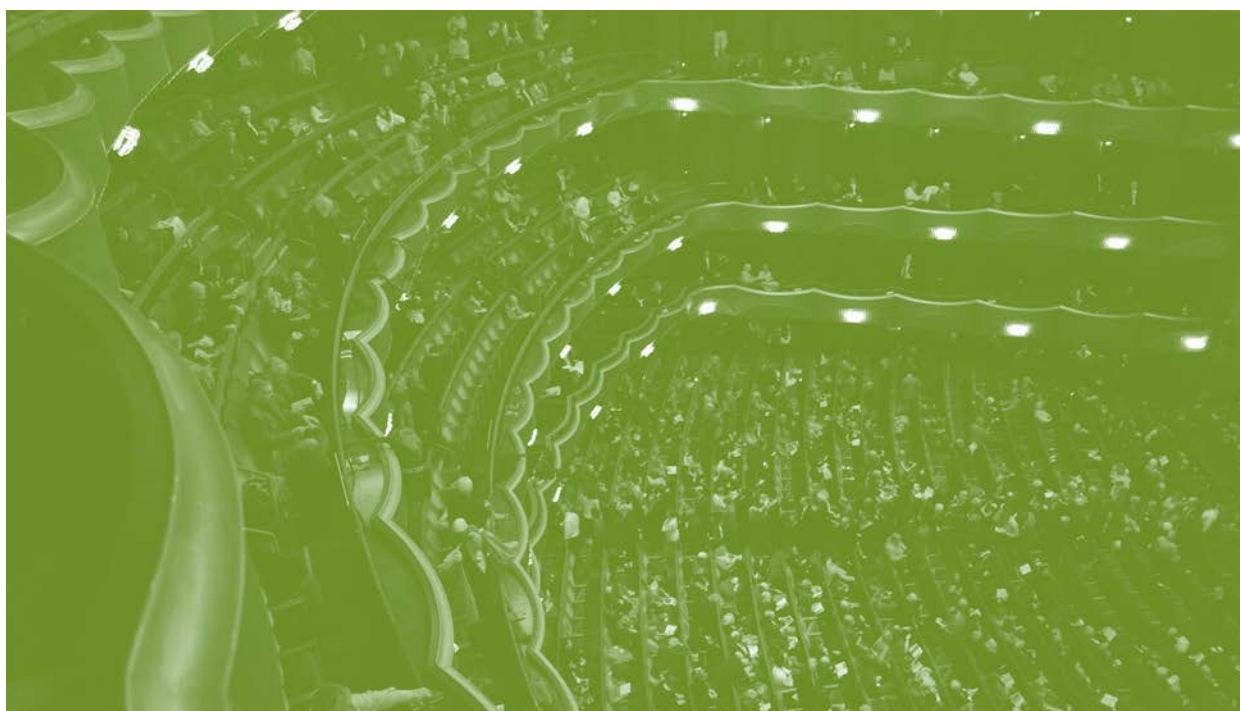
63 year-old man, Bromley

How do Londoners engage in arts and culture today?

To analyse how Londoners participate in arts and culture today, we analysed new data from a survey conducted by Savanta of 1,579 Londoners aged 18+ online on 21-26 June. Data were weighted to be representative of all Londoners aged 18+ by age, sex, London region, SEG, ethnicity, 2024 London Mayoral vote and 2019 General Election vote. Savanta is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

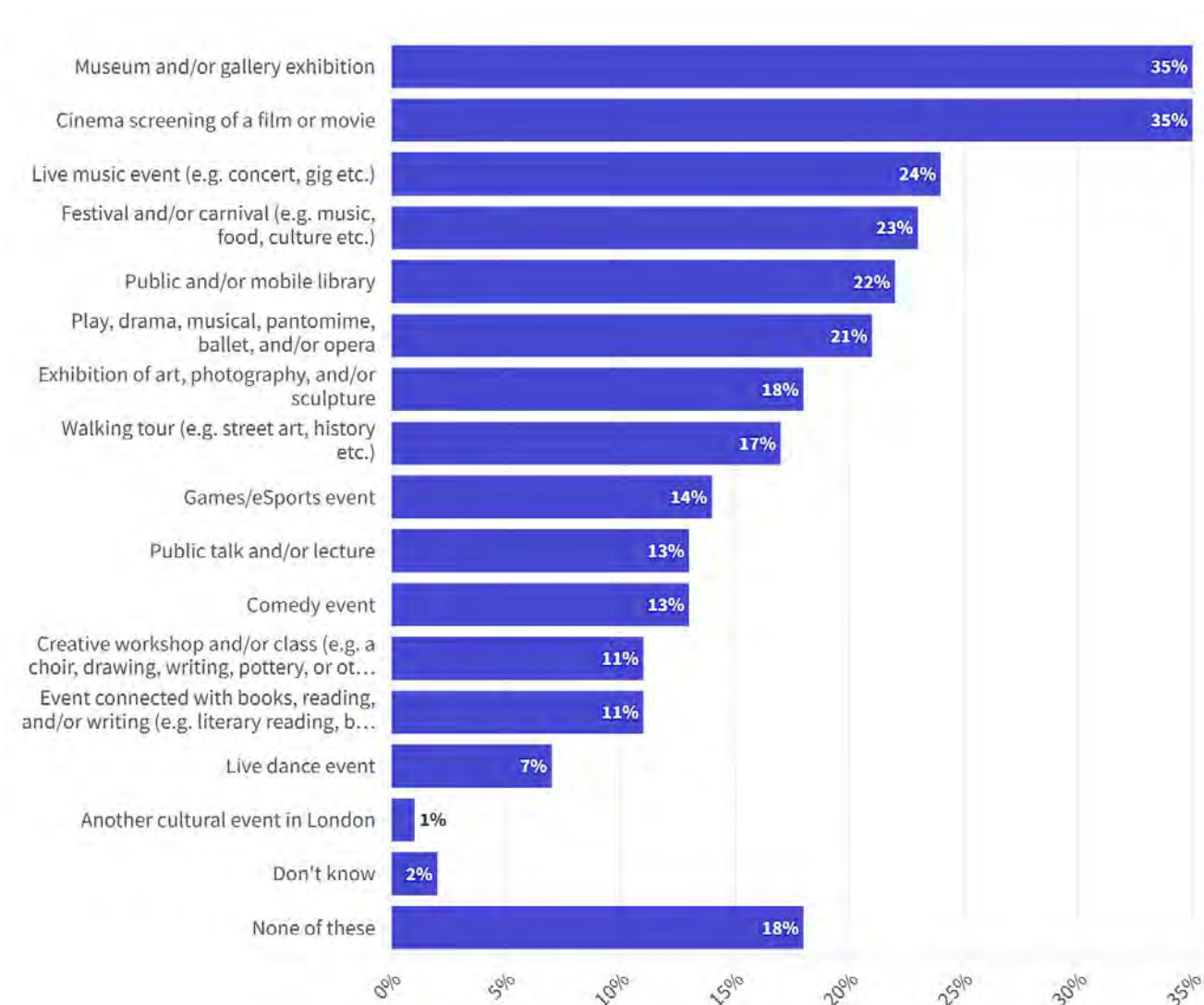
Based on recent survey data, 80% of Londoners attended at least one cultural event and one in six (18%) did not attend any cultural events.

The most attended events/places were museums and/or galleries (35%), a cinema screening of a film or movie (35%) or a live music event (24%). This was closely followed by a festival and/or carnival (23%), public and/or mobile library (22%) or a play, drama, musical, pantomime, ballet and/or opera (21%). The least attended events were exhibitions (18%), walking tours (17%), games/eSport events (14%), public talk and/or lecture (13%), comedy (13%), creative workshop and/or class (11%), event connected with books, reading or writing (11%) and finally a live dance event (7%).



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Figure 7: Which of the following art and cultural events/places, if any, have you attended in London in person in the last 12 months?

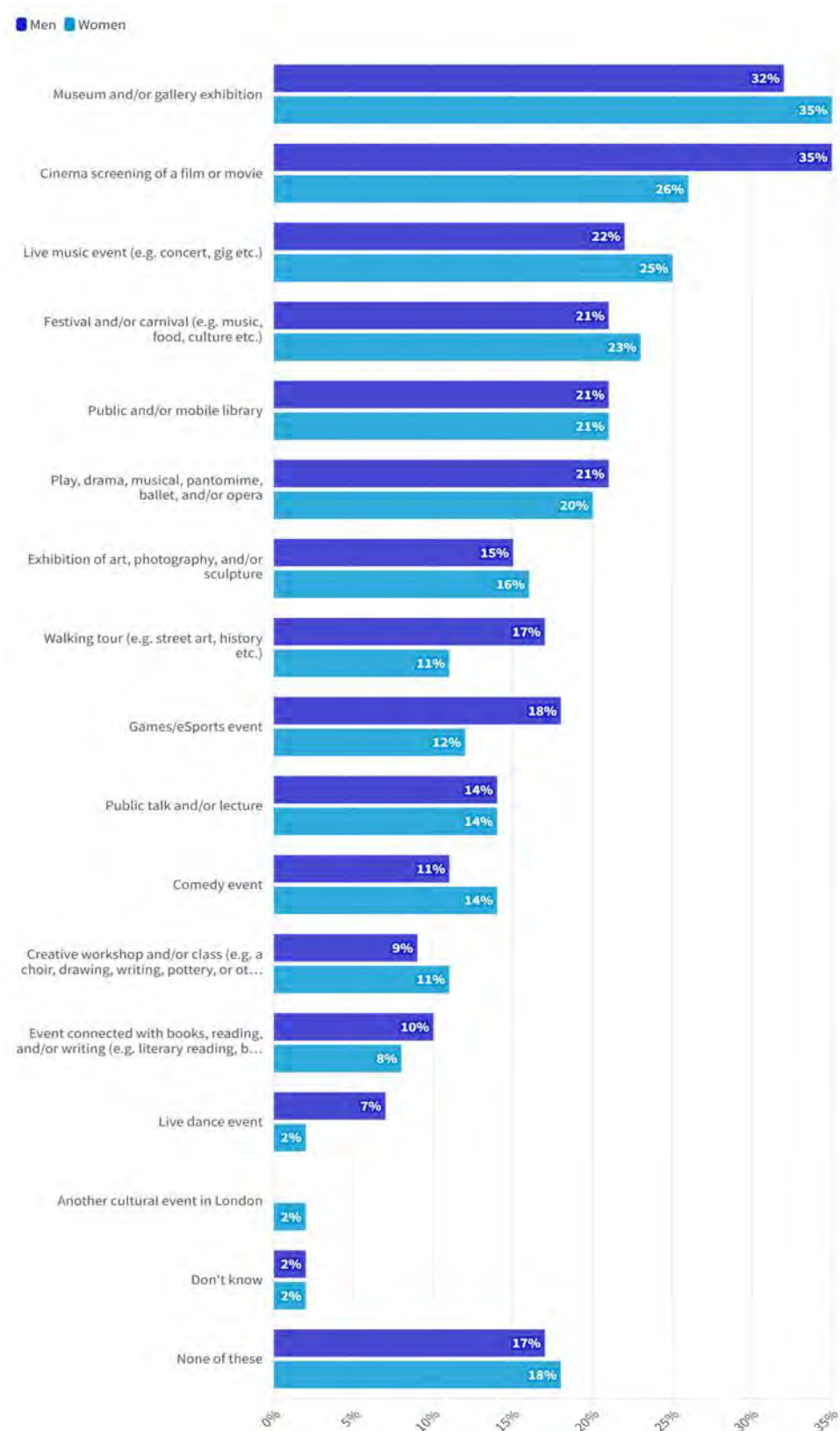


Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

“Wife & I love stuff that’s left-field and stretches your mind! Culture in all its guises is one of the main reasons we’re still in London after 40 years.”

70 year-old man, Brent

Figure 8: Which of the following art and cultural events/places, if any, have you attended in London in person in the last 12 months?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

There are slight but notable differences in the kinds of arts and culture that women and men in London engage with, with women more likely to have attended a museum or exhibition and men more likely to have attended a sports event.

While overall rates of cultural engagement were similar between men and women, the kinds of arts and cultural events attended varied by gender. Women were significantly more likely to have attended a museum and/or gallery exhibition, with 38% reporting having done so in the last 12 months, while only 32% of men reported doing so. Similarly, women were significantly more likely to have attended an exhibition of art, photography and or sculpture, with 20% reporting have done so compared to just 15% of men.

By contrast, men were significantly more likely to have attended a games or eSport event, with 18% having done so compared to just 11% of women.

Younger Londoners are more likely to engage in almost all forms of arts and culture, with the exception of plays, drama, pantomime, ballet or opera.

Younger Londoners aged 18-34 were more likely to have engaged with arts and culture, with 88% reporting having attended at least one cultural event. In contrast, almost a third (29%) of those aged 55+ reported attending none of cultural events described.

In terms of the kinds of arts and cultural activities engaged with, Londoners of all ages were equally likely to have attended a museum or art gallery (35%) or an exhibition of art, photography and/or sculpture (18%).

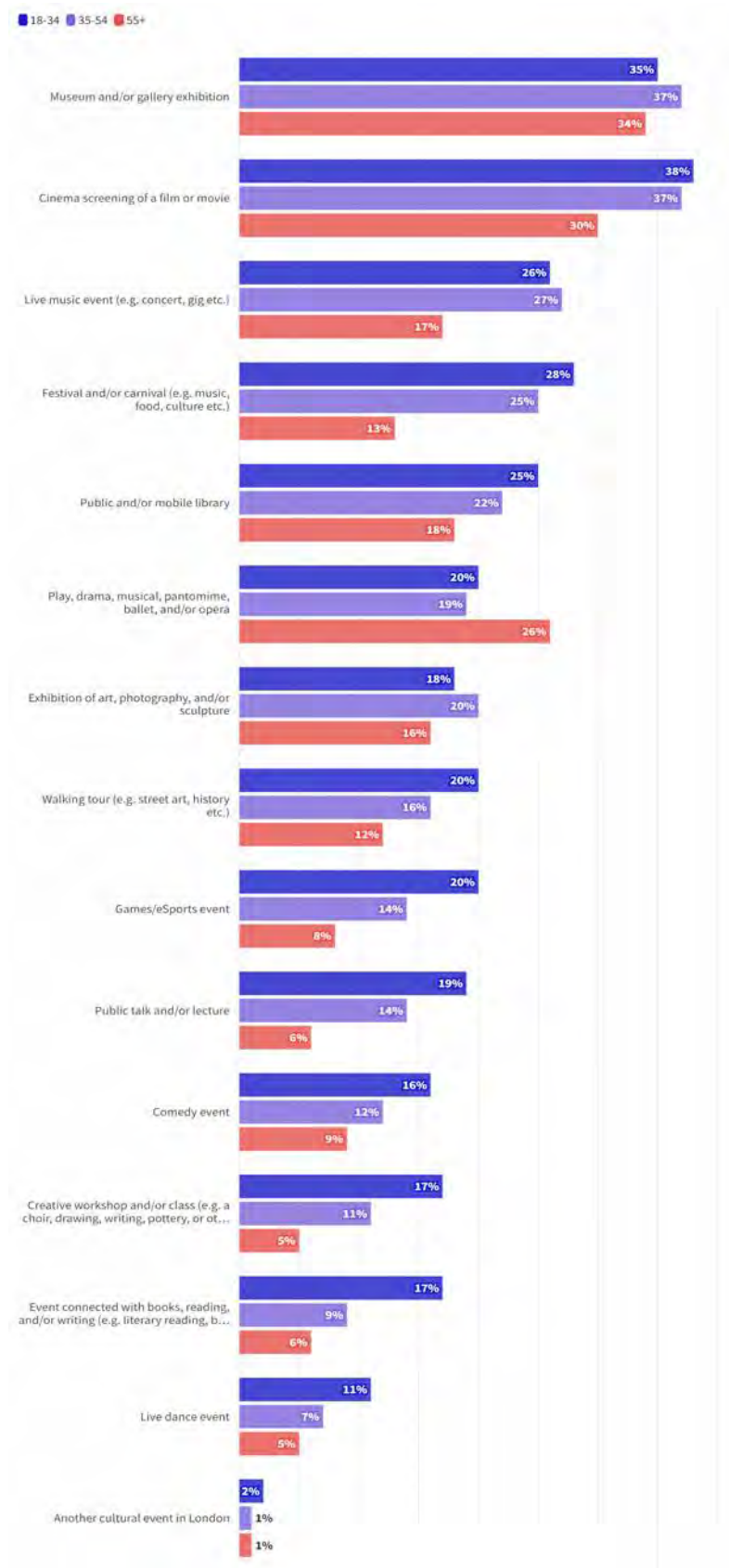
Younger people were generally more likely to have engaged in other forms of cultural activity, such as cinema screenings, live music and festivals than older Londoners, with the exception of plays, drama, pantomime, ballet or opera where around a quarter (26%) of people aged 55 and above reporting attending in the last 12 months, in contrast to a fifth (20%) of those aged 18-34.

Londoners in managerial and professional occupations are much more likely to engage in arts and culture than those in manual occupations.

There were differences in engagement in arts and culture between Londoners of different social backgrounds, measured through social grade.¹ ABC1 respondents, comprising those in managerial, administrative and professional occupations, were 12 percentage points more likely overall to have attended an arts or culture event, with 86% having done so, while only 74% C2DE respondents in manual occupations or who were unemployed reported doing so.

1. Social Grade is a socio-economic classification which groups people by occupation to understand their social and financial position. ABC1 refers to people in managerial, administrative and professional occupations, while C2DE refers to people in skilled and unskilled manual occupations or who are unemployed.

Figure 9: Which of the following art and cultural events/places, if any, have you attended in London in person in the last 12 months?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

“I think that (as a 16 year old) my friends are less inclined towards cultural events because they seem to attract, and be marketed towards older crowd.”

17 year-old man, Hounslow

Amongst those who did attend a culture or arts event in the previous 12 months there were also differences in the kinds of arts and culture people of different social grades engaged with. ABC1 respondents were almost twice as likely to have attended a play, drama or similar stage performance, with more than a quarter (27%) reporting having done so, compared to just 14% of C2DE respondents. ABC1 respondents were also more likely to have attended a museum and/or gallery exhibition (40%) or exhibition of art, photography or sculpture (24%) than C2DE respondents, where only 30% and 15% respectively reported having done so. ABC1 respondents were also more likely to have attended a cinema screening, with 40% having done so in preceding 12 months versus 33% of C2DE respondents.

Londoners from Ethnic Minority backgrounds are more likely to engage in arts and culture than those from White ethnic backgrounds.

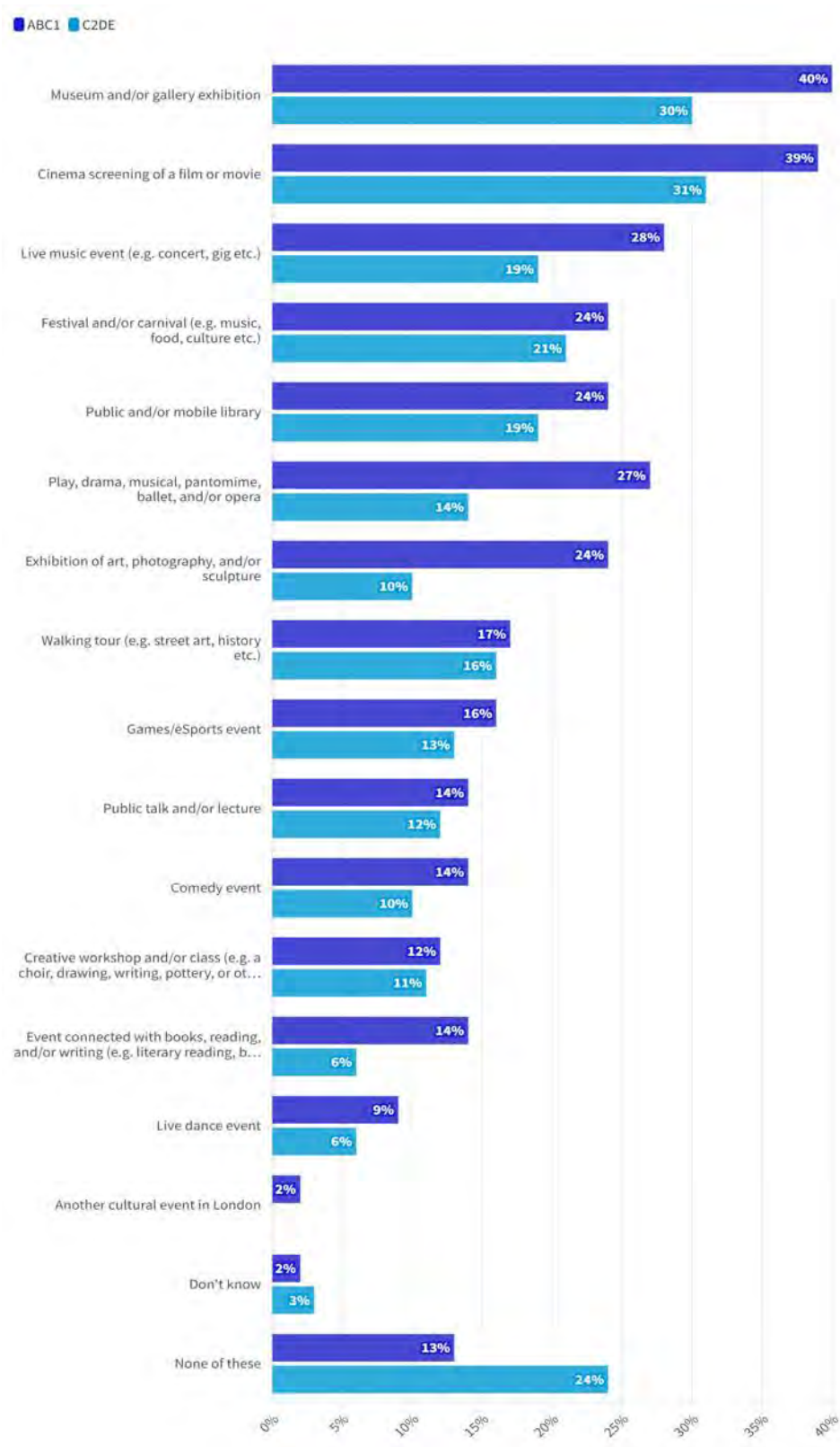
83% of Londoners from an Ethnic Minority background reported attending a cultural event or activity in the last year.² This was 5% higher than the proportion of respondents who from a White ethnic background.

There were differences in some of the kinds of cultural activities respondents from different ethnic backgrounds reported attending. White respondents were more likely to have attended a museum or gallery opening (39%) than those from an Ethnic Minority background (31%). White respondents were also more likely to report having attended a live music event (26%) than those from an Ethnic Minority background (21%), and to have attended a play, drama or similar stage show, where 26% of respondents from a White ethnic background reported having done so as compared to 16% of those from an Ethnic Minority background.

In contrast, respondents from an Ethnic Minority background were more likely to report having attended a festival and/or carnival event (27%) than respondents from a White ethnic background (19%), and to have attended a public or mobile library, with a quarter (25%) of Ethnic Minority respondents reporting having done so compared to 19% of White respondents. Respondents from an Ethnic Minority background were also more likely to report having attended walking tour (e.g. street art or history), with 19% of respondents reporting having done so compared to 15% of White respondents. Similarly, respondents from an Ethnic Minority background were more likely to have attended a Games or E-sport event (17%) or Public Talk and/or lecture (16%), compared to 12% and 10% respectively of White respondents.

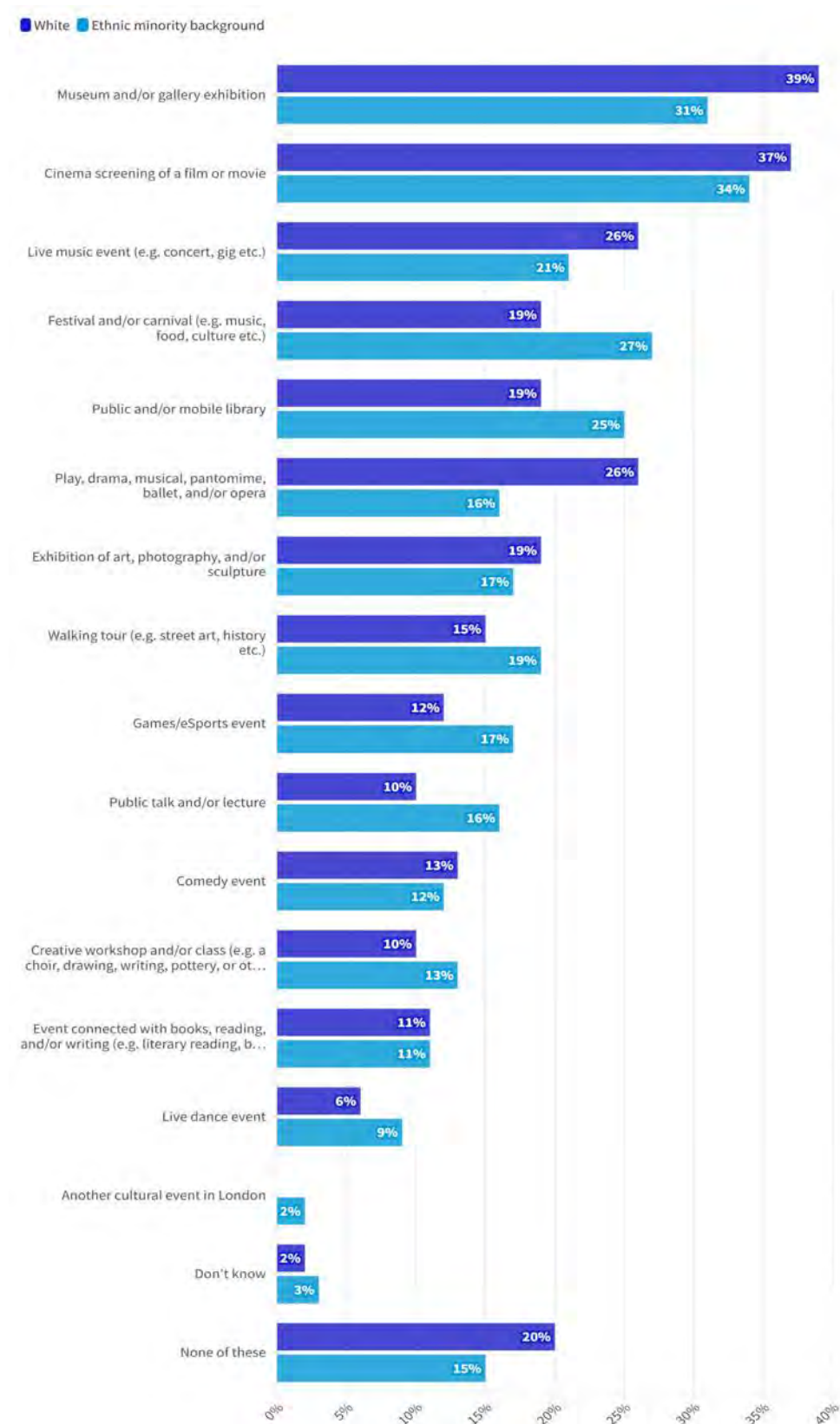
² Due to limitations of our sample, we were unable to breakdown respondents by ethnicity beyond those who identified as White or as belonging to an Ethnic Minority background. Given this lack of granularity, these findings on ethnicity should be treated with caution.

Figure 10: Which of the following art and cultural events/places, if any, have you attended in London in person in the last 12 months?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

Figure 11: Which of the following art and cultural events/places, if any, have you attended in London in person in the last 12 months?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

What matters most to Londoners for accessing arts and culture today?

Affordability and convenience are the most important consideration for Londoners accessing culture.

Affordability is crucial to accessing culture in the capital. When asked 'which of the following, if any, are the most important things you consider when deciding whether or not to attend arts and cultural events in London', 46% of respondents placed 'ticket prices or overall cost of attendance' in their top three reasons. This was followed by 'location of event' (37%), personal interest (36%) and date and/ or time of the event (30%).

Convenience was also highlighted as a key consideration with regard to accessing culture, with respondents highlighting 'more events in my local area', 'more convenient event times (e.g. weekends, evenings etc.)' and 'more reliable, frequent or less expensive transport options' as important factors.

There are some important differences between London's communities and demographics in the factors they consider most important when deciding to engage in arts and culture.

Women were slightly more likely than men to rate ticket price or overall cost and safety and/or security measures as the most important factor.

In terms of age, while there were no significant differences between age groups in considering ticket price or overall cost of attendance as the most important factor, younger Londoners aged between 18-34 or 35-54 were more likely to consider the cost of travel to an event the most important factor than Londoners aged 55 or over.



“I am discouraged from booking many cultural events because of ridiculous online booking fees. If I have booked an event and paid a high booking fee, I am less likely to book at this venue again because I’d have to pay yet another booking fee.”

68 year-old man, Haringey



© Clem Onojeguo

Older Londoners aged 55 and above were more likely to rate personal interest in an event the most important factor when deciding whether to attend arts and cultural events.

People living in Inner London were more likely than those living in Outer London to consider the cost of travel to an event as the most important factor when deciding to attend an arts or culture event.

Finally, respondents from a White ethnic background were more likely than those from an Ethnic Minority background to identify personal interest in an event to be the most important factor when deciding to attend an arts or cultural event. White respondents were also more likely to rate ticket prices or the overall cost of attendance as the most important factor. Conversely, respondents from an Ethnic Minority background were more likely to consider the cost of travel to an event as the most important factor.

How do Londoners find out about arts and cultural events?

Londoners most frequently find about arts and cultural events through on social media, word of mouth or by searching online.

44% of Londoners reported finding out about arts and cultural events via social media, higher than either word of mouth (39%) or via online search (37%). Other common ways of finding out about arts and cultural events were via advertisements on public transport (24%), print media (23%), outdoor advertisements (e.g. billboards) and via local television, radio and/or podcasts (21%).



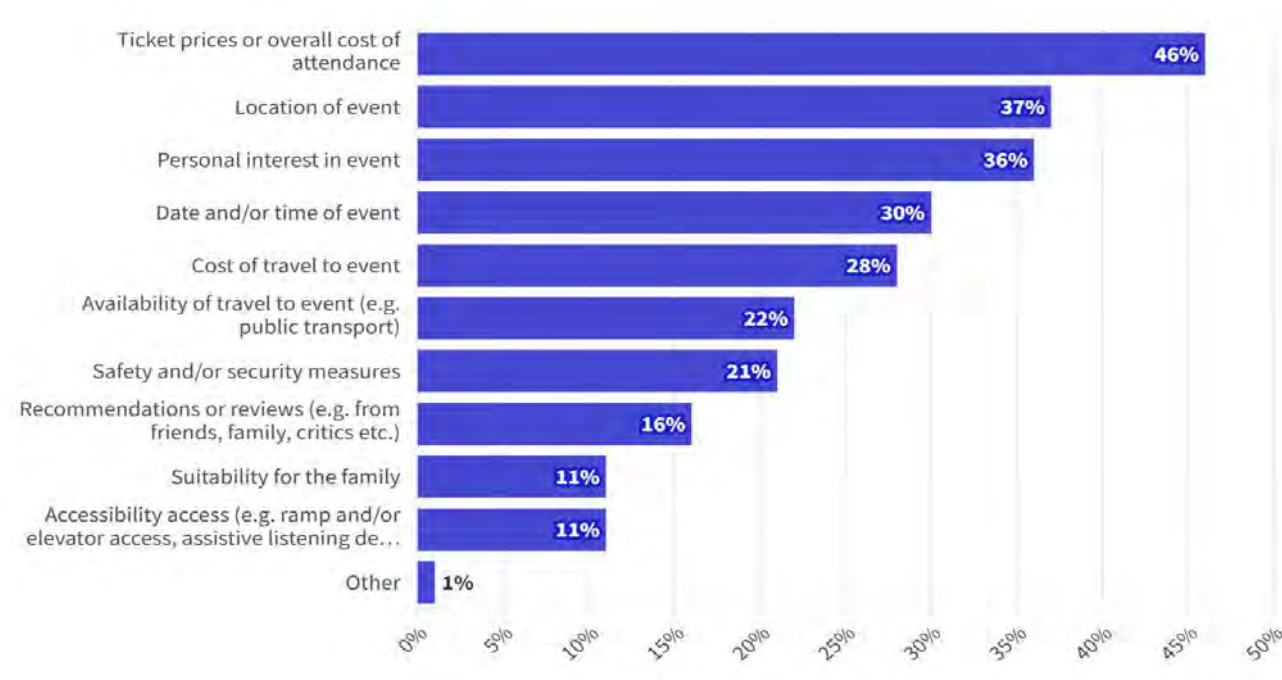
© Arlinda

“When it costs in excess of £70-80 per ticket to see a show in the West End it becomes impossible to afford taking a family to watch. I work in theatre and cannot afford to even go to the shows I work on.”

34 year-old woman, Lambeth

There were some demographic differences in how Londoners heard about arts and culture. Older Londoners aged 55 and above were much more likely to hear about arts and cultural events through word of mouth than people aged 18-34 or 35-54, with almost half (48%) reporting doing so compared to around 35% of younger Londoners. They were also more likely to hear about arts and cultural events through print media or from local television, radio or podcasts.

Figure 12: Which of the following, if any, are the most important things you consider when deciding whether or not to attend arts and cultural events in London?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

By contrast, younger Londoners were more likely to hear about arts and culture through social media, with 51% of 18–34-year-olds and 49% of 35–54-year-olds reporting using social media to find out about arts and cultural events compared to just 28% of those aged 55 and above.

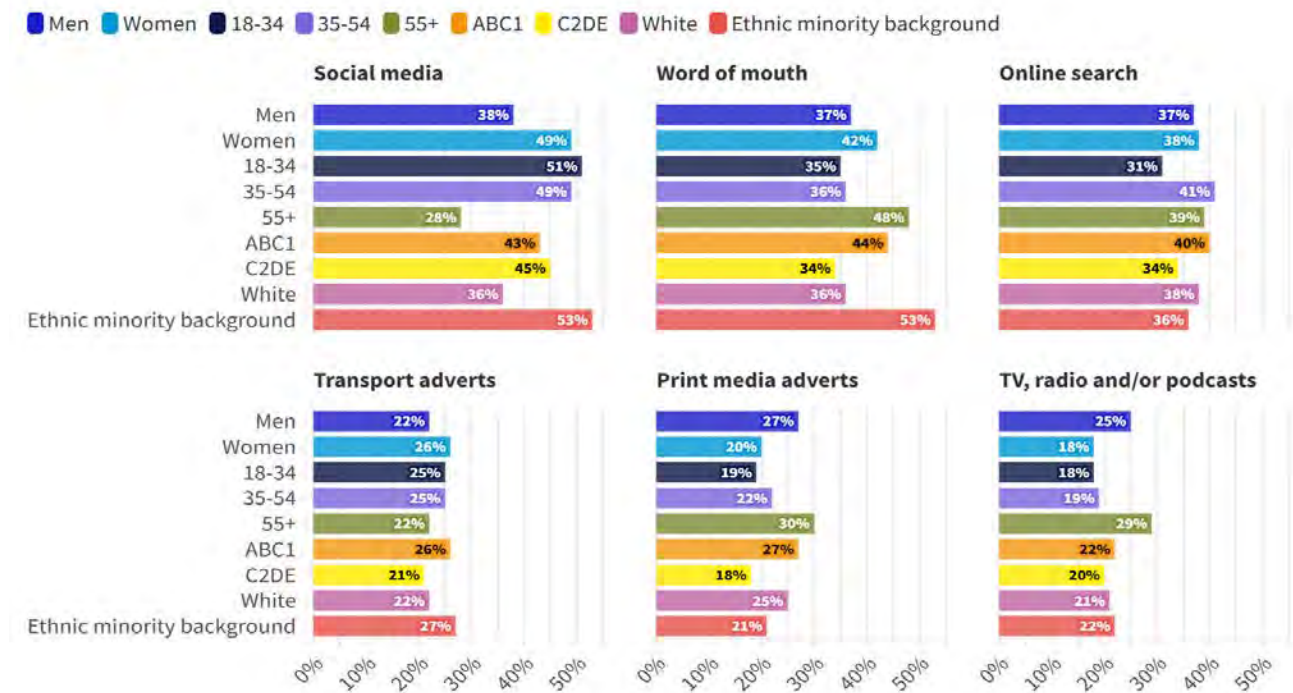
Respondents identifying as being from an Ethnic Minority Background were also much more likely to hear about arts and cultural events through social media, with 53% of respondents reporting doing so, compared to 36% of White respondents. By contrast, respondents from a White ethnic background were more likely to have heard about events through print media, with a quarter (25%) reporting having done so compared to 21% of respondents identifying as being from an Ethnic Minority background.

These significant differences in the channels Londoners from different communities and demographics receive information highlight the importance of audience-first and data-led approaches for arts organisations seeking to reach diverse communities.

For the large, well-publicised events it is easy to find information. For the smaller or local events, it is difficult in many instances to actually find out what is going on, where it is, how to get there and back and how much it costs.

70-year-old man, Merton

Figure 13: Through which of the following places, if any, do you find out about art and cultural events in London?



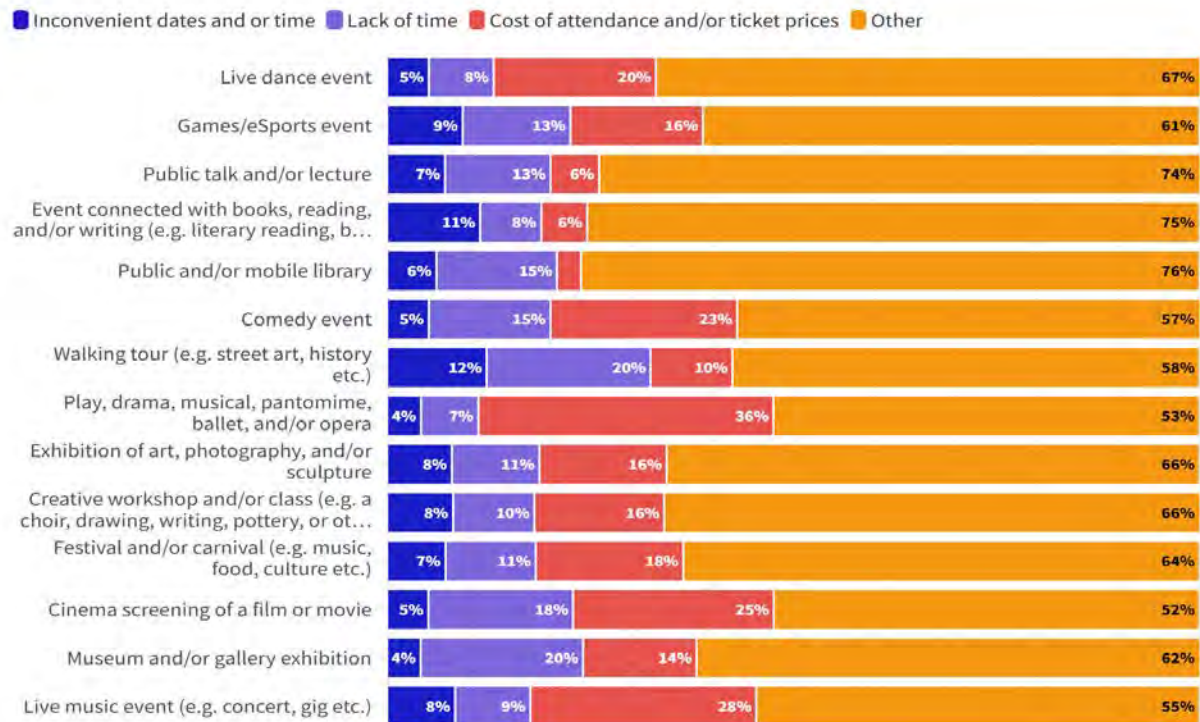
Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

Chapter 3

What are the barriers to engagement in arts and culture in London today?



Figure 14: For each of the following activities, what is the main reason you don't attend more of them than you currently do?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

What factors are the biggest barriers to Londoners not engaging with arts and culture more than they currently do?

Cost is the most frequent reason Londoners don't attend more than they currently do for most cultural and arts events.

For most of the kinds of arts and cultural activities Londoners were asked about, respondents selected cost of attendance and/or ticket prices as the main reason they don't attend more than they currently do. This was most pronounced for plays and similar stage performances, where 36% of Londoners selected cost of attendance as the main reason, the most frequently selected reason. Other events where cost was the most frequent reason given were cinema screenings, live music and comedy events, where around a quarter selected cost as the main prohibitive factor. Cost was also the most common main prohibitive factor for festivals (18%), public talks and/or lectures (16%), exhibitions of art, photography and/or sculpture, and creative workshops or classes (16%).

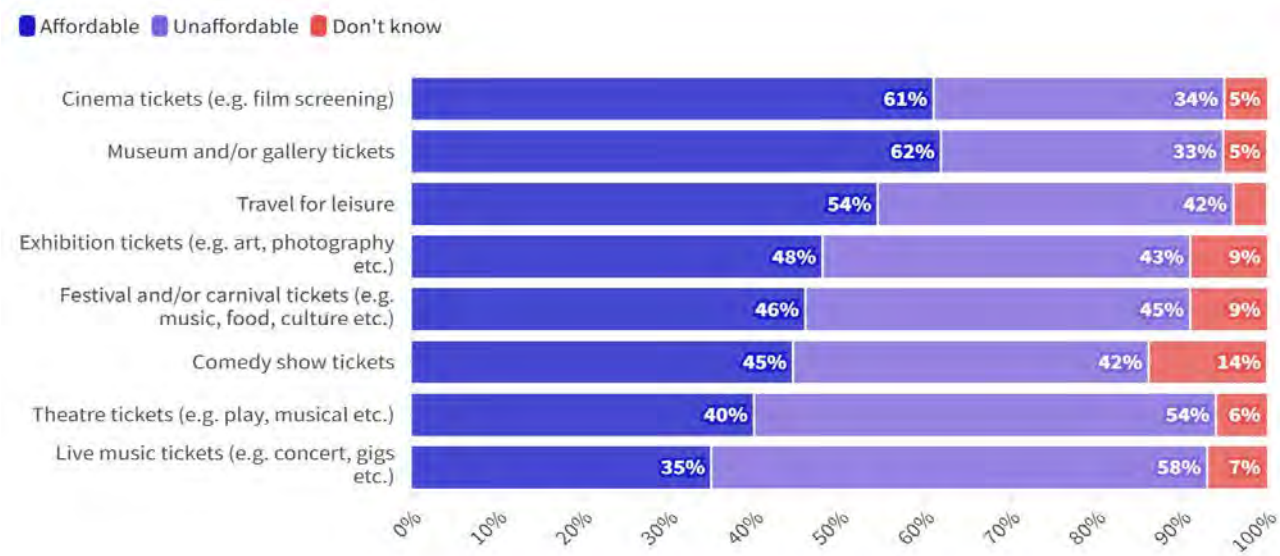
"I have lived in London for 11 years and work in visual arts. I have never thought to go to a West End play because they're so expensive."

30 year-old man, Lewisham

Cost is a particularly important factor for older Londoners and from a White ethnic background.

Older Londoners aged 55+ were more likely than those aged 18-34 or 35-54 to consider ticket prices or overall cost of attendance an important thing when deciding to attend an arts or culture event, with a majority (55%) reporting doing so compared to around 42% of younger Londoners. Londoners from a White ethnic background were also more likely to consider cost an important factor, with 50% reporting doing so compared to 41% of respondents from an Ethnic Minority background.

Figure 15: To what extent would you say that each of the following in London are affordable or unaffordable for you personally?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

Londoners feel that some forms of arts and cultural engagement are more affordable than others, but no forms of arts and cultural activity are universally perceived affordable.

Londoners deemed museums and galleries as the most affordable cultural offering, with 62% of respondents saying they are affordable. Londoners also perceive cinema tickets as relatively affordable, with 61% doing so.

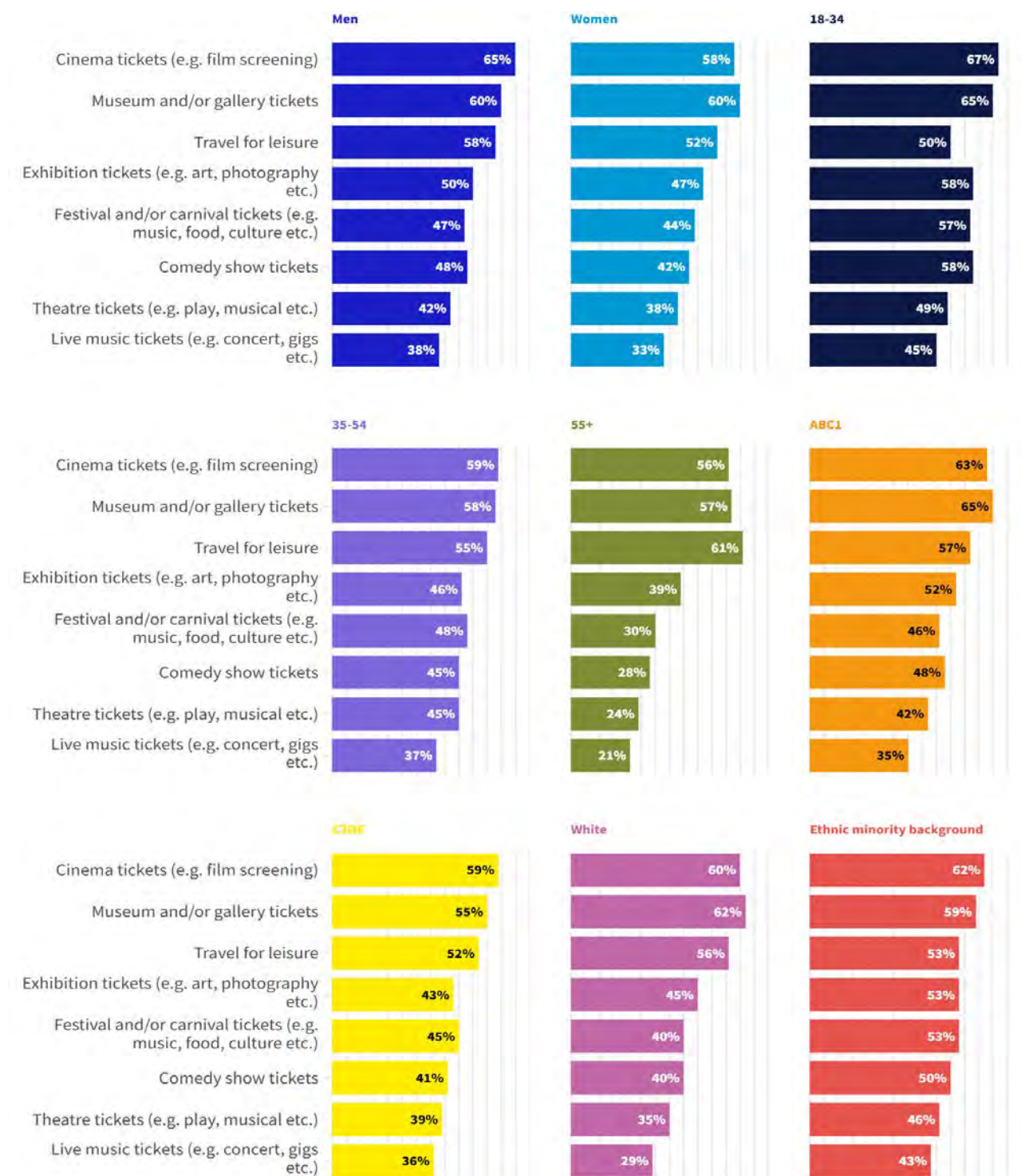
“A key reason that Londoners don’t take advantage of the cultural activities in the city is that they can’t afford it. Ticket prices have risen hugely, as has the cost of eating out, or even getting a cup of coffee. Essential costs of living swallow up earnings for too many of us.”

44 year-old women, Newham

Despite many museums and galleries offering free entrance, a third of Londoners (33%) still stated these would be unaffordable for them. Similarly, 34% stated that cinema tickets were unaffordable.

The majority of Londoners consider theatre tickets (54%) and live music tickets (58%) unaffordable.

Figure 16: To what extent would you say that each of the following in London are affordable or unaffordable for you personally?

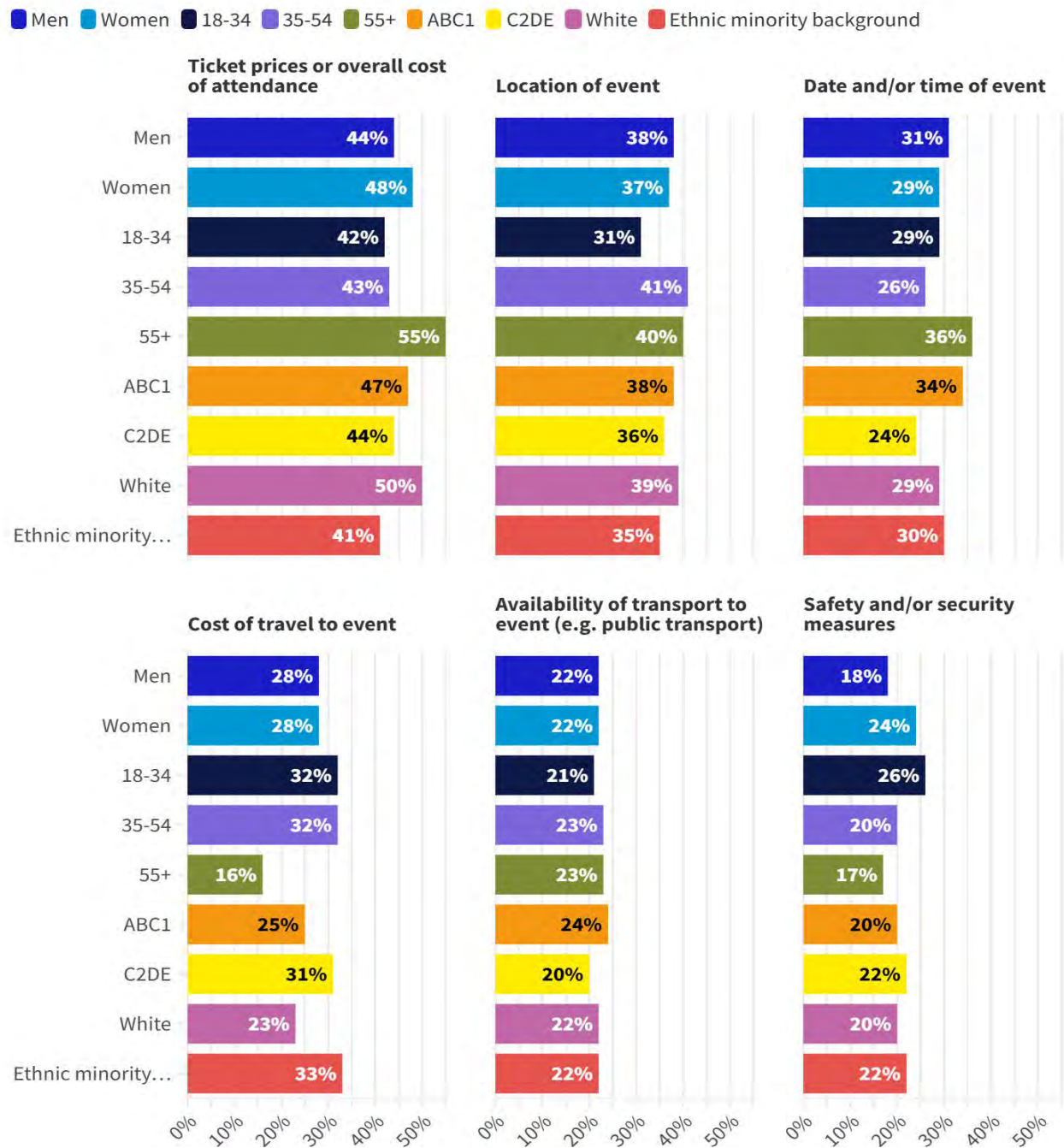


Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

Around a third (32%) of Londoners aged younger than 54 reported the cost of travel to an event one of the most important factors when deciding to attend, where this was among the most important factors for just 16% of Londoners aged 55 and over.

Women and younger Londoners were significantly more likely to consider safety and/or security measures among the most important factors when deciding to attend events.

Figure 17: Which of the following, if any, are the most important things you consider when deciding whether or not to attend arts and cultural events in London?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

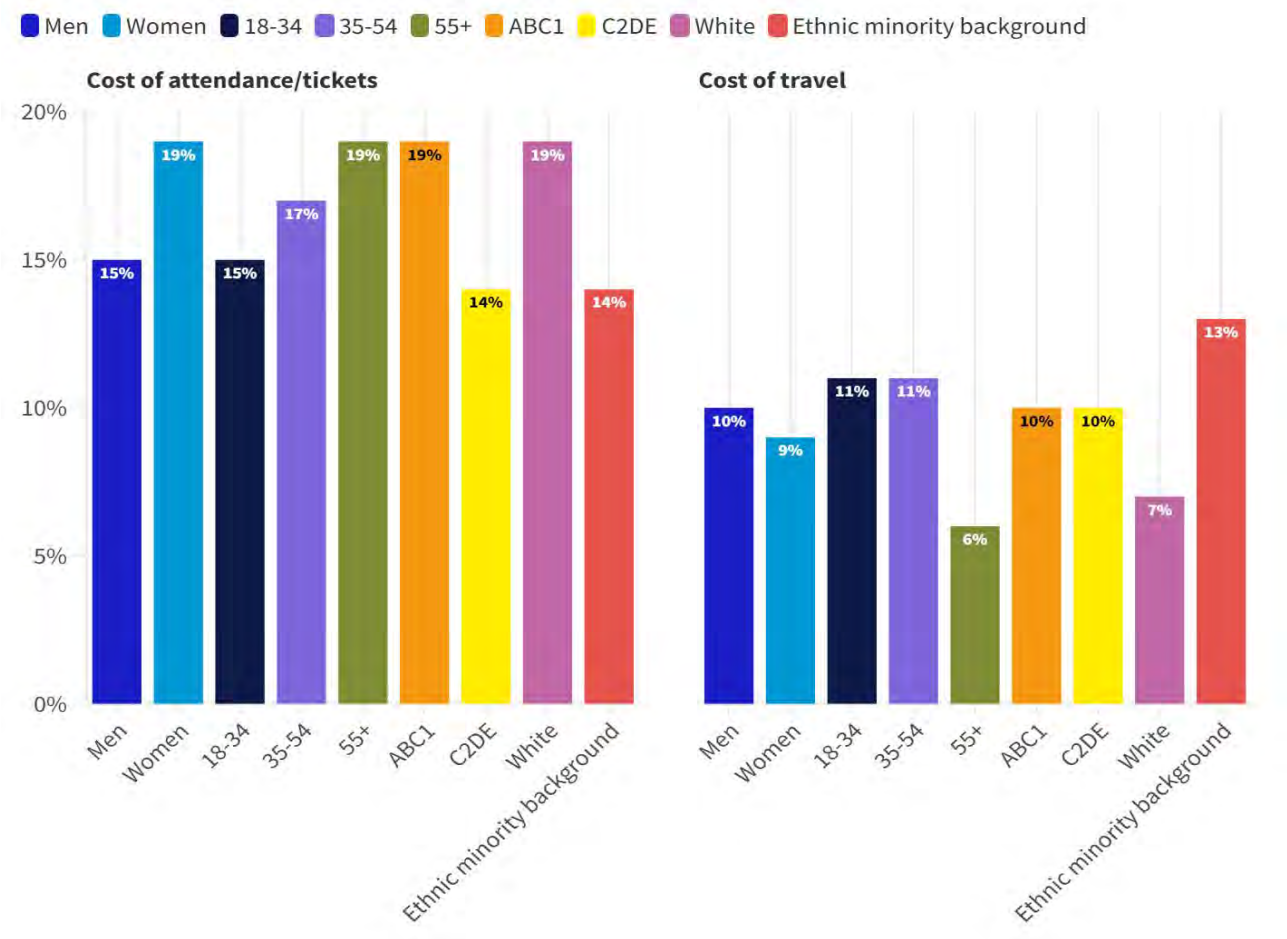
Almost a quarter (24%) of women reported safety and/or security measures as one of most important factors when deciding to attend, compared to less than a fifth (18%) of men. Londoners aged 18-34 were significantly more likely than older Londoners to consider safety one of the most important factors, with more than a quarter (26%) doing so.

What factors are the biggest barriers for different kinds of arts and cultural events?

Cost is the most significant barrier for the majority of arts and cultural events, with lack of time also being a barrier for specific types of events such as museums or galleries.

More than a 36% of respondents reported that cost of attendance and/or ticket prices was the main reason they did not attend more plays, dramas, musicals or similar stage productions than they currently do. This was also the case for live music events (27%) cinema screenings (25%) and comedy (23%), where around a quarter of respondents said that cost was the main reason for not attending more.

Figure 18: Which of the following, if any, are the most important things you consider when deciding whether or not to attend arts and cultural events in London?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

“I like to pop in and make visiting museums and galleries (in particular) part of my everyday life, but paying £22 to see an exhibition may be expected for tourists who are here to do that one thing, but less so for local people who may more positively engage in the longer term.”

43-year-old woman, Lambeth

Lack of time was the most common reason given by people for not attending more museums and galleries (20%), with the same reason also most popular for walking tours (e.g. street art, history and architecture) with 20% reporting lack of time being the main reason they don't attend more.

Respondents from a White ethnic background were more than twice as likely to report cost as the most important factor in not attending more plays, dramas or musicals, with 44% citing it as the most important factor, compared to around a fifth (20%) of respondents from an Ethnic Minority background. Respondents from a White ethnic background were also 8 percentage points more likely to report cost as the main factor for not attending more cinema screenings than respondents from an Ethnic Minority background.

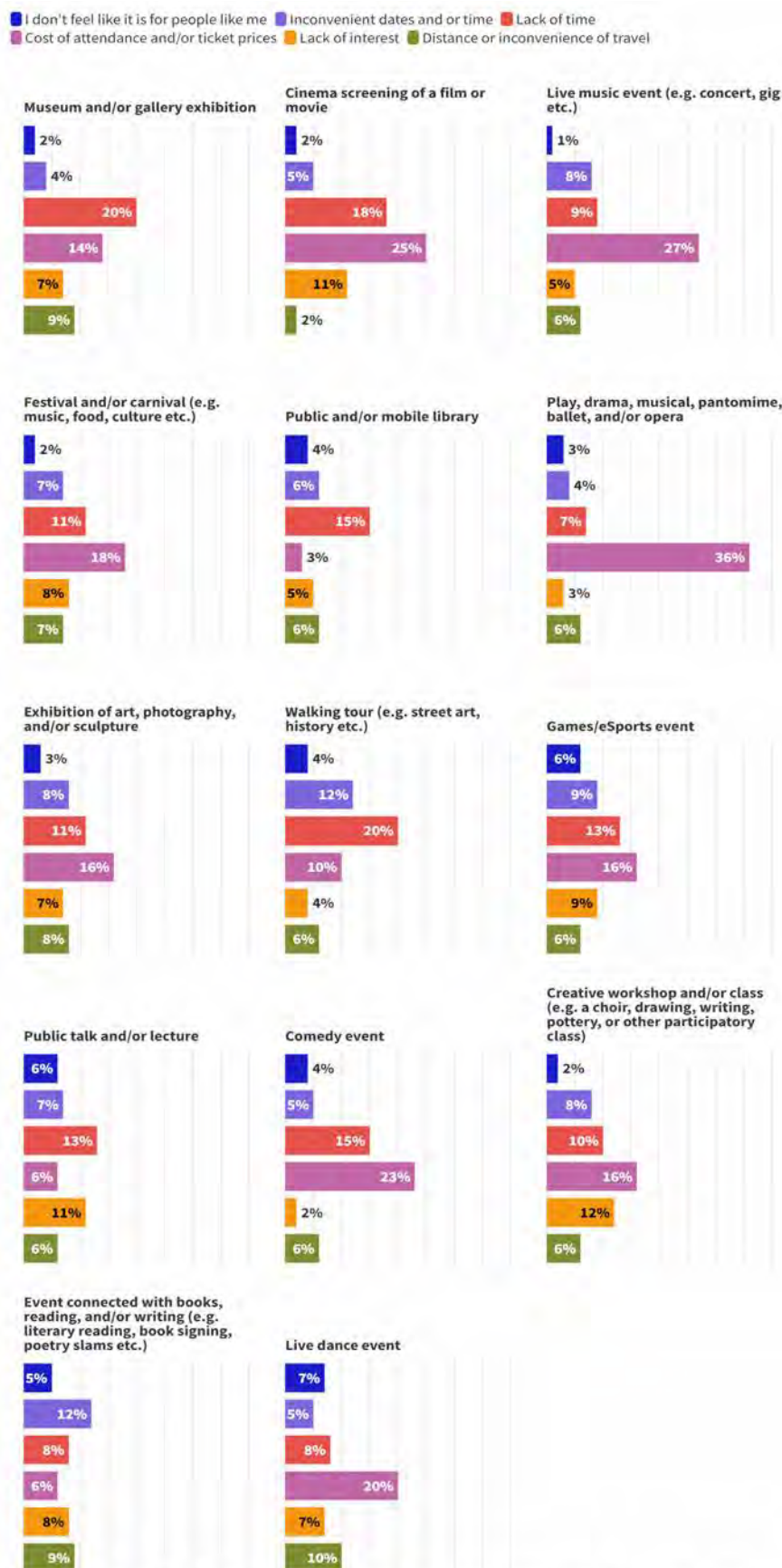
Londoners from an Ethnic Minority background are much more likely to feel that arts and cultural events are 'not for people like me' or to prefer other types of cultural activity.

For plays, dramas and musical theatre, respondents from Ethnic Minority backgrounds were 9 percentage points more likely than White respondents to say that feeling that such events were 'not for people like me' is the main reason they do not attend more than they currently do. They were also more likely to cite a preference for other types of cultural activity, or lack of time as the main reason. Around 30% of respondents from an Ethnic Minority background cited one of these factors as the main reason for not attending more.

Description automatically generated This was particularly the case for certain forms of cultural activity. For example, Ethnic Minority respondents were significantly more likely to state 'I don't feel like it is for people like me' as the main reason for not attending more public talks and or lectures than White respondents.

However, despite the importance of these attitudinal factors amongst some groups, most Londoners feel that London's arts and cultural scene is representative of London's diverse population and communities and represents a diversity of arts and cultural events.

Figure 19: For each of the following, what is the main reason you don't attend more of them than you currently do?²³



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024) • Data shows percentage of demographic group were the chosen option was in the top three reasons whether or not to attend arts and cultural events.

72% of Londoners felt that the capital's arts and cultural scene is either very representative or somewhat representative of London's population and communities, with 71% feeling it is very or somewhat representative of a diversity of arts and cultural interests.

Key takeaways

Despite its world-class cultural offering, physical engagement with arts and culture in London sits around the national average. Londoners are, however, much more likely than people in other regions to engage with arts and culture online.

There are large geographic inequalities in engagement in arts and culture in-person across the city, with some boroughs amongst the least engaged nationally. Outer Londoners are more likely to engage in arts and culture online than those in Inner London, but there are very large variations at the borough level.

London's diverse demographics and communities engage in arts and culture with different types of arts and culture, and to differing extents. Men in London are more likely to engage in games or e-sports, while women are more likely to have visited a museum or gallery exhibition. Younger Londoners are more likely to engage in almost all forms of arts and culture, with the exception of plays, drama, pantomime, ballet or opera. Londoners from managerial and professional backgrounds are much more likely to engage in arts and culture overall than those in manual occupations. Londoners from an ethnic minority background are more likely overall to engage in arts and culture than those from a White ethnic background.



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Londoners most frequently find about arts and cultural events through social media, by word of mouth or by searching online.

Cost is the most frequent reason Londoners don't attend more than they currently do for most cultural and arts events, and is the most significant barrier for the majority of arts and cultural events. Londoners feel that some forms of arts and cultural engagement are more affordable than others, but no forms of arts and cultural activity are universally perceived as affordable.

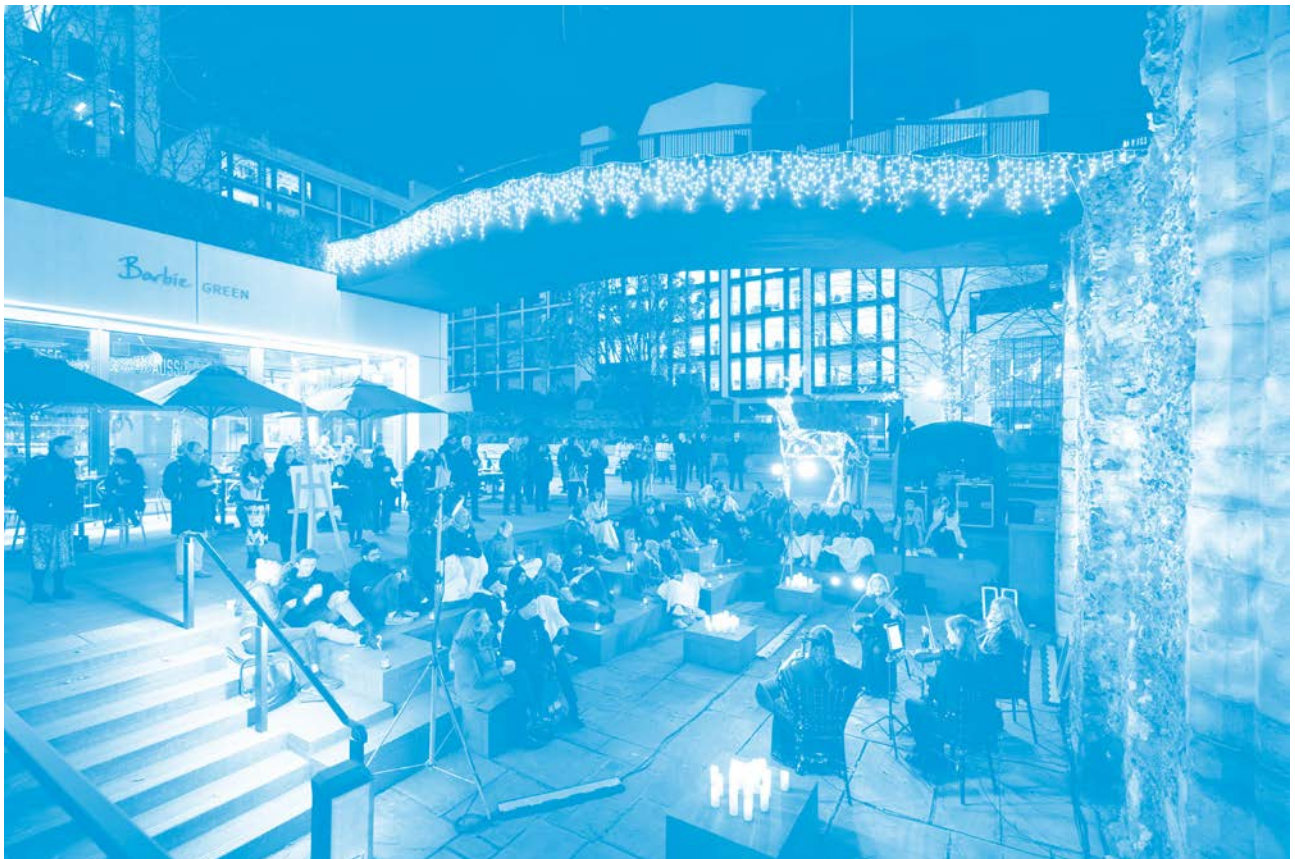
Cost is a particularly important factor for older Londoners and those who identified as White. Younger Londoners aged 54 and below were significantly more likely to consider the cost of travel, rather than ticket price or overall cost of attendance, as an important factor when attending an event.

While cost is important for most Londoners and most events, there are some important differences between London's communities and demographics in the factors they consider most important when deciding to engage in arts and culture.

Women and younger Londoners are significantly more likely to consider safety and/or security measures among the most important factors when deciding to attend events.

Londoners from an Ethnic Minority background are much more likely to feel that arts and cultural events are 'not for people like me' or to prefer other types of cultural activity.

However, most Londoners, including those from Ethnic Minority backgrounds feel that London's arts and cultural scene is representative of London's diverse population and communities, and represents a diversity of arts and cultural events.



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Chapter 4

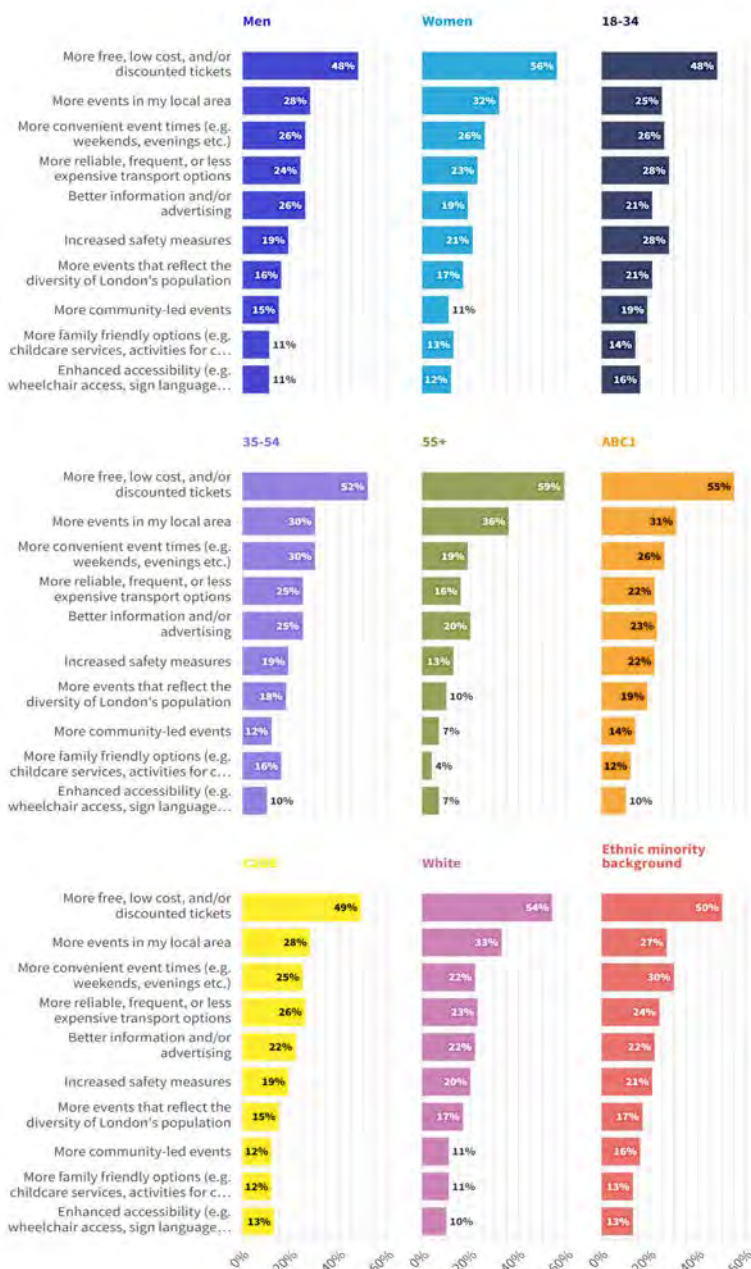
Increasing engagement in Arts and Culture in London – what might be done?



To help focus our analysis of the literature, polling and TalkLondon data, and insights from our expert interviews and advisory group sessions, we drew on a framework from recent research by New Philanthropy Capital which categorises the factors which might act as barriers to people engaging in arts and culture into three types:

1. Practical barriers: Not being able to go, or not knowing that something was happening, due to a lack of convenience (e.g. time, location), prohibitive pricing or a lack of awareness.
2. Functional barriers: Not being able to take part, regardless of how much you might want to.
3. Attitudinal barriers: A feeling that the arts aren't for people like you, or that you simply aren't interested. Cost or convenience are not a major factor.²⁴

Figure 20: For each of the following, if any, would make you more likely to attend art and cultural events in London?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

Tackling practical barriers

A majority of Londoners feel that efforts to tackle practical barriers, such as more free, low cost and/or discounted tickets, would make them more likely to attend arts and cultural events.

Cost matters

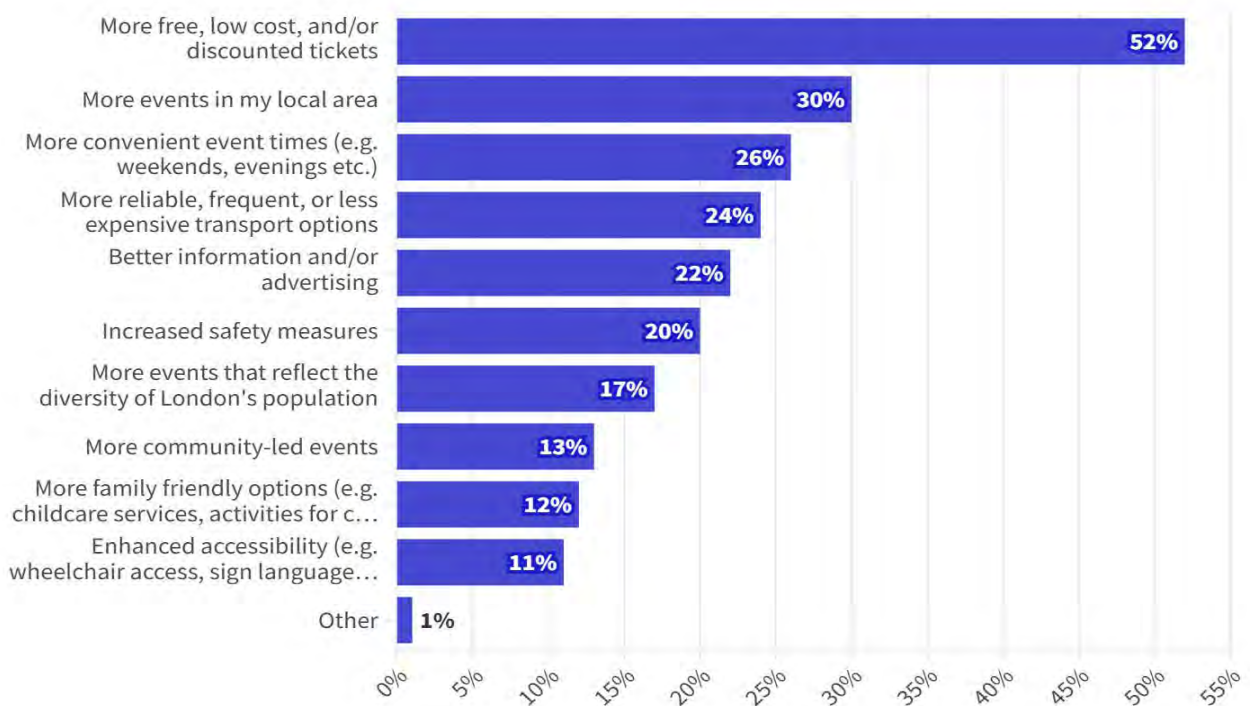
Never understood why we don't have a Londoners' discount at most places. A lot of major cities offer this incentive!

29 year-old man, Ealing

Just over half of Londoners (52%) ranked reduced or free tickets are among the top three things that would make them more likely to attend. Older Londoners aged 55+ were particularly likely to state that interventions like free or low-cost tickets would make them more likely to attend.

This aligns with existing evidence that when, controlling for other demographic factors, lower rates of arts participation, arts attendance and museum and gallery visits are seen amongst those who assessed themselves as 'finding it difficult financially' than those defining themselves as 'living comfortably'.²⁵

Figure 21: Which of the following, if any, would make you more likely to attend art and cultural events in London?



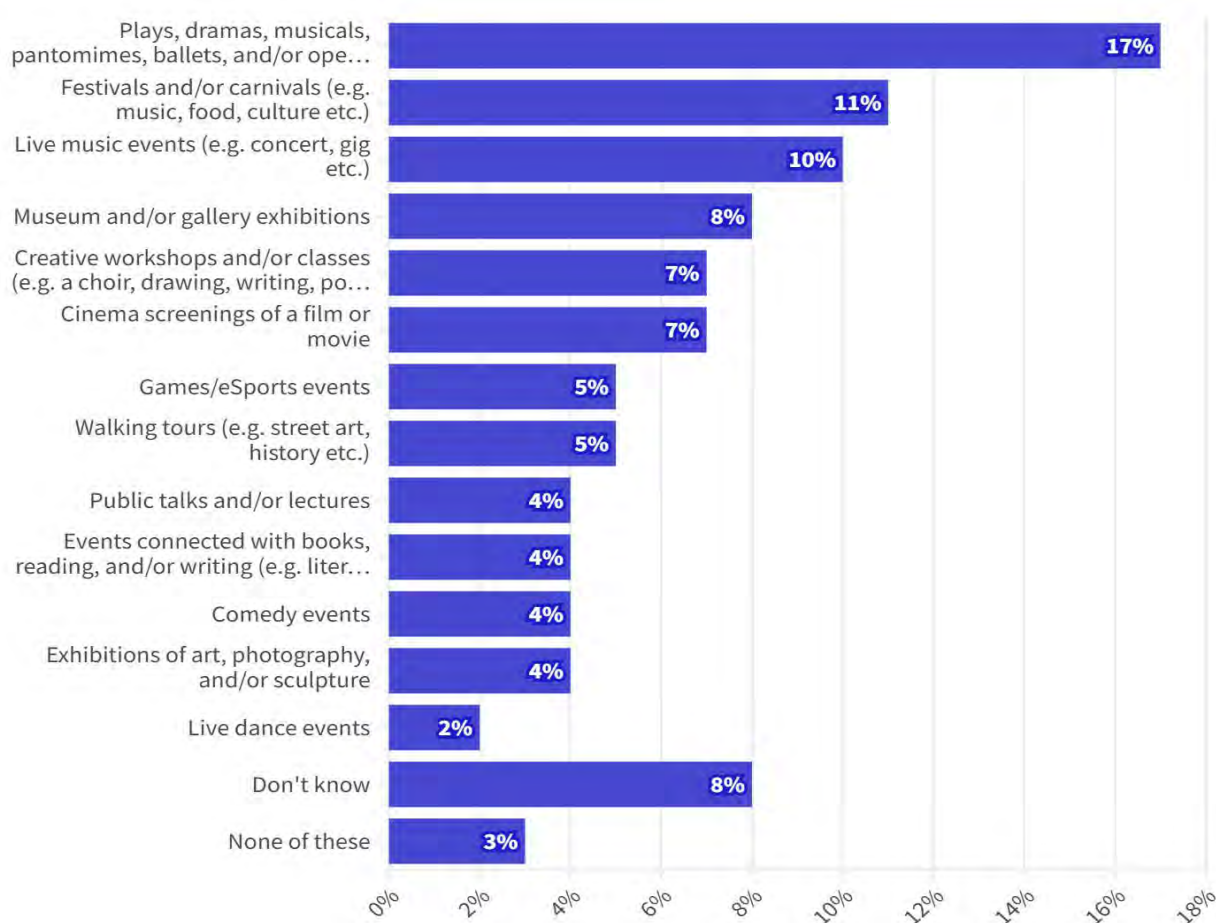
Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

“What is the point in extending hours of the Tube, or making it cheaper to travel on a Friday, if there is nothing affordable to do or see?”

34 year-old woman, Waltham Forest

The salience of cost, especially ticket prices for events, is also highlighted in the perceptions of arts and cultural organisations, with polling suggesting that one in two practitioners working for arts organisations feel that high ticket prices are the main reason why more people don’t engage with the arts.²⁶ As such, it is unsurprising that efforts to reduce the cost and increase the convenience of access to arts and culture are common. However, several practitioners we interviewed felt that simply reducing the ticket prices or increasing the number of free arts events is not as straightforward a solution as the data might suggest. Discounted tickets aimed at widening participation may just end up reducing the cost of attendance for people who would have attended anyway – this is both ‘dead-weight’ in policy terms, and potentially inequitable.

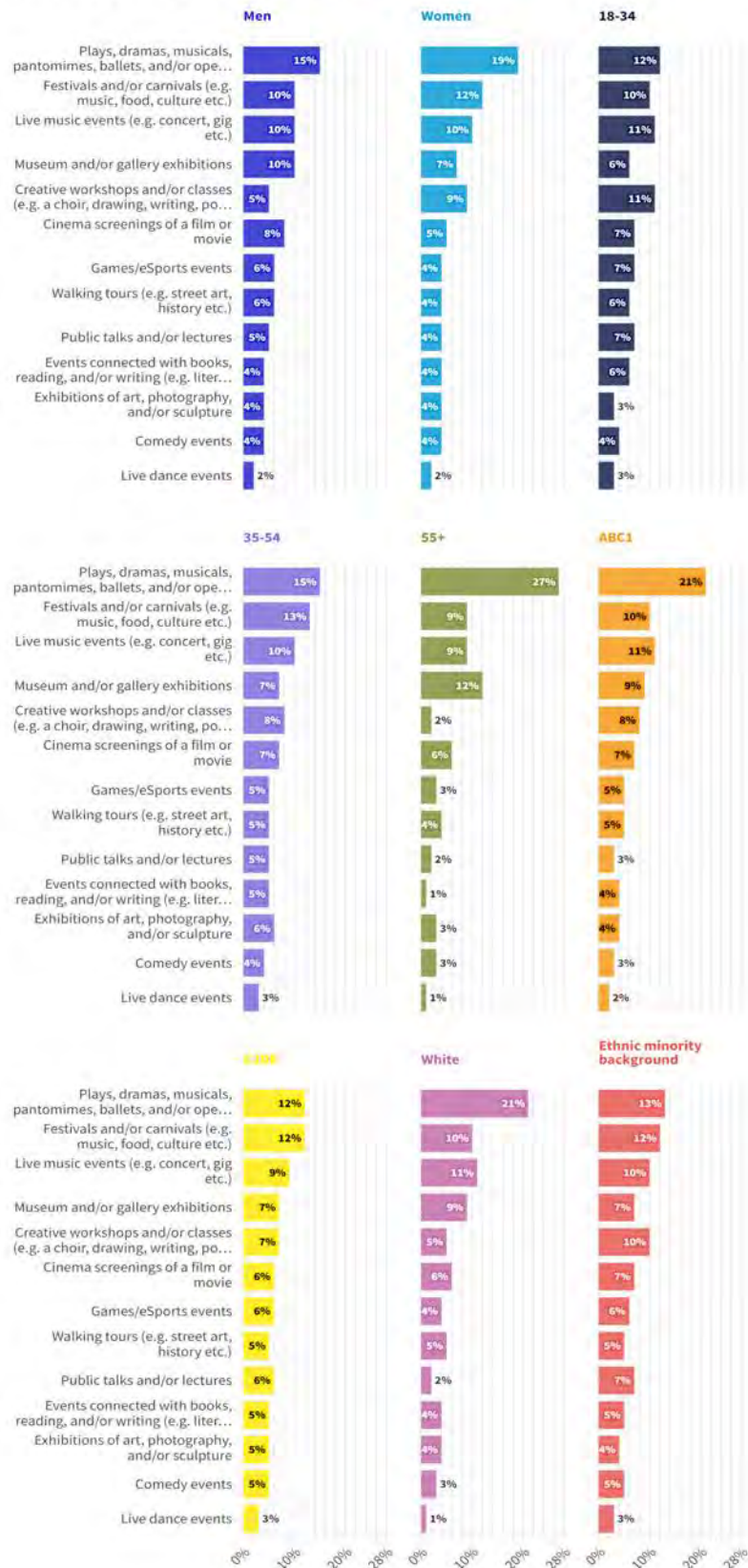
Figure 22: If the government could only make one of the following art and cultural events cheaper for Londoners like you, which of the following, if any, would you choose?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

Figure 23: For each of the following, if any, would make you more likely to attend art and cultural events in London?

If the government could only make one of the following art and cultural events cheaper for Londoners like you, which of the following, if any, would you choose?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

This question of how to direct any subsidised or reduced cost cultural offers is complicated by taste and personal preferences. Our polling highlights that Londoners have mixed opinions on which arts and cultural events the government could prioritise to make cheaper. While the most frequently chosen option was Plays, Dramas, Musicals and other stage productions, chosen by 17% of respondents, responses were broadly distributed across various types of arts and culture events.

With arts organisations increasingly relying on ticket revenues to offset reductions in public funding, this complexity is particularly challenging as it suggests that reducing the cost of specific arts and cultural offerings could primarily benefit existing and already-engaged audiences, rather than broaden engagement.

Despite these consequential issues regarding the impact and effectiveness of reducing the cost of tickets, our literature review surfaced very little robust evidence on the impact, mechanics or distributional effects of interventions to increase participation in arts and culture through reducing the cost of entry. This is an important gap in the evidence, especially with regard to the distributional effects of reducing prices (i.e. who benefits, and to what extent are these benefits intended).

There, however, numerous examples of more universal initiatives to reduce the cost of arts and culture which have resulted in overall increases in participation. Several interviewees referred to the success of the move in 2001 to offer free entry to the permanent galleries at national museums. Between 2001 and 2011, visits to museums in London that previously charged have increased by 151 per cent.²⁷

Interviewees highlighted the longer-term benefits of these kind of universal initiatives in tackling more functional barriers, such as lack of familiarity with arts and cultural venues or awareness of the offer, especially when targeted at young people.

RECOMMENDATION

● *Introduce a National Arts Pass for U-25s.*



© John Cameron

Practical barriers must be taken seriously, especially for London's minorities

Our polling highlighted that, while there was consensus on the importance of cost as a practical barrier, other barriers such as safety and security were just as if not more important for specific groups.

The reliability, frequency and cost of public transport, particularly matter for younger Londoners. Almost a quarter of Londoners aged 18-54 ranked more reliable, frequent, or less expensive transport options as one of the most important factors which would make them more likely to attend arts and cultural events, whereas only 10% of older Londoners did so.

Safety and security are particularly important for Ethnic Minority respondents who were significantly more likely to state that increased safety measures would make them more likely to attend, with almost a quarter doing so (24%), 7 percentage points more than White respondents. It is also much more important for younger respondents, with 28% of 18-34 year olds ranking it as one of the most important factors, twice the rate amongst 55+ year olds (13%).

"I rarely go to the theatre, as I have impaired hearing. Nothing more annoying than paying a lot of money for a play than being unable to hear what is being said. I go to the cinema a lot, as long as there is a subtitled version on offer."

65-year-old woman, Lewisham



© Rach Teo

“The Borough of Culture meant we celebrated the culture in the neighborhoods – the hidden gems that are not necessarily showcased in the big institutions.”

Local Cultural Practitioner

Access issues that may be faced by disabled people wishing to participate in arts and culture, with evidence that genuinely inclusive and robust user testing models³ and user-led design can improve access and hence engagement for disabled audiences and feedback to the Talk London event highlighting accessibility of both venues and travel infrastructure as a key barrier for those with mobility impairments.²⁸ There was also some indication that these barriers around accessibility affected some communities more than others, with Ethnic Minority respondents slightly (4 percentage points) more likely to rank accessibility as an important factor when considering whether to attend an arts or cultural event.

3 A model of user testing which focuses on understanding the channels and methods which people participate in activities or consumer products.

Tackling Functional Barriers

Culture round the corner

Almost a third of Londoners (30%) rated more local events at more convenient times amongst one of the most important things that would increase their participation in arts and culture.

We heard from a number of our interviewees about the importance of physically embedding arts and cultural offers in local communities, with initiatives like the London Borough of Culture cited as an example of tackling a functional barrier to participation both by decentering Central London as the centre of London’s arts and cultural scene (not having to ‘go into town’ for culture) while also working within boroughs themselves to cultivate diverse arts and cultural activity outside of established areas such as town centres (e.g. Walthamstow in Waltham Forest).

RECOMMENDATION

Reinvigorate local authority culture strategies to plan for the long term to foster local cultural activity.

Several interviewees and respondents to Talk London highlighted the rising cost of venue and rehearsal space hire as a key functional barrier to locally-focused arts and cultural activities, and that efforts to open up low-cost venue and rehearsal space are an important means of nurturing community-level arts and culture.

I run an LGBTQ+ dance club for Latin & Ballroom Dancing, but venues which have a large dance floor in London are very expensive. We have over 300 members, but often struggle to find venues.

68-year-old woman, Waltham Forest

RECOMMENDATION

Restore arts funding to local government to 2010 levels.

Interviewees also highlighted longer-term reductions in statutory arts funding via local government and more recent changes to Arts Council funding significantly impacted the ability of local arts organisations embed over time and build the sort meaningful and deep relationships with residents in that build profile and trust and ultimately broaden participation.

They also highlighted that offering long-term certainty and stability to practitioners and organisations beyond set piece events will help 'bank' the gains of high-profile initiatives such as the Borough of Culture programme.

RECOMMENDATION

Reinvest in London's local arts through a tourist tax.

In a fiscal context that will continue to be tight, there is an important role for private and corporate support for arts and culture, particularly to expand participation and engagement. For example, there is a particular place for business associations and BIDs in their role as local placemakers and convenors to integrate placemaking and community engagement activities into public arts and cultural activities. Examples of this include, Wandsworth Town BID's Old York Road Unplugged community music festival, and Angel Islington BID's community sports and entertainment focused Angel Canal Fest. Additional investment must also be backed with insight and a developed understanding of how and why local communities engage with different programmes. A data-led approach to marketing and content generation would provide greater insight into the preferences of audiences and their attitudes to different programmes. Interviewees also highlighted opportunities for collaboration and cross-promotion of events and offers to further optimise awareness raising activities.

RECOMMENDATION

Arts organisations should take an audience-first approach, using data, insight and collaboration to more effectively reach and engage diverse audiences.

"Events bring footfall, but additional secondary spend and dwell time is also important. people get a kind of muscle memory and go, well, I'll pop down and I know there's bound to be something on."

Local Cultural Practitioner

Cultural place-making and creating destinations

While the data did highlight that convenience of time and location was important for Londoners, we also surfaced good evidence that people are often willing to travel to participate in arts and culture, especially for 'destination' or 'treat' outings.

Several interviewees suggested that this is where cultural institutions should consider their role in local place-making, not just programming, to expand participation and engage wider audiences. Locations such as the South Bank, the West End, and Exhibition Road in Kensington were cited as examples of arts and cultural offers that are 'more than the sum of their parts' and have developed a sense of place and destination which encourages people to visit and stay. East Bank London was cited as an example of an evolution of this approach, where multiple major London arts and cultural institutions entered into a formal place-based collaboration where enhancing the desirability of the Stratford Olympic Park is a shared goal and mechanism of engaging local community.

However, such destination-making offers are contingent on travel infrastructure. Several participants in the Talk London event highlighted the importance of travel infrastructure, particularly into the evenings and how this was a particular consideration for certain groups with regards to safety (e.g. women travelling at night) and accessibility (e.g. people with impairments or people with young children).

“Things like the Borough of Culture, Creative Enterprise zones, the Culture at Risk Register, the Creative Land Trust - all these initiatives have been redefining culture in a much broader sense and integrating it into the life of the city.”

Cultural Policy Expert

Championing London’s local culture to unlock resource and raise profile

Several interviewees raised the impact of the role of the Mayor of London and the 2016 Culture Strategy for London, highlighting both the importance championing London’s cultural life as part of major programmes - Boris Johnson was reported to have advocated strongly for flagship cultural and educational institutions to be central to the 2012 Olympic programme (e.g. the opening ceremony) - and specific policy interventions such as the Borough of Culture in both unlocking resource and spurring innovation at the local level. One interviewee highlighted that it was Sadiq Khan’s announcement of the latest round of bidding for London Borough of Culture that spurred political leaders to prioritise it. Culture has also formed a central part of London’s sub-regional and local investment portfolios, including programmes by organisations such as West London Alliance, Opportunity London, and the Cross River Partnership. Arts Council England backing was also highlighted as a crucial ingredient in several initiatives seen to have driven broader participation in localities, such as the Borough of Culture programme and local initiatives such as Creative Barking and Dagenham, a site-specific programme of events in areas with low cultural provision.

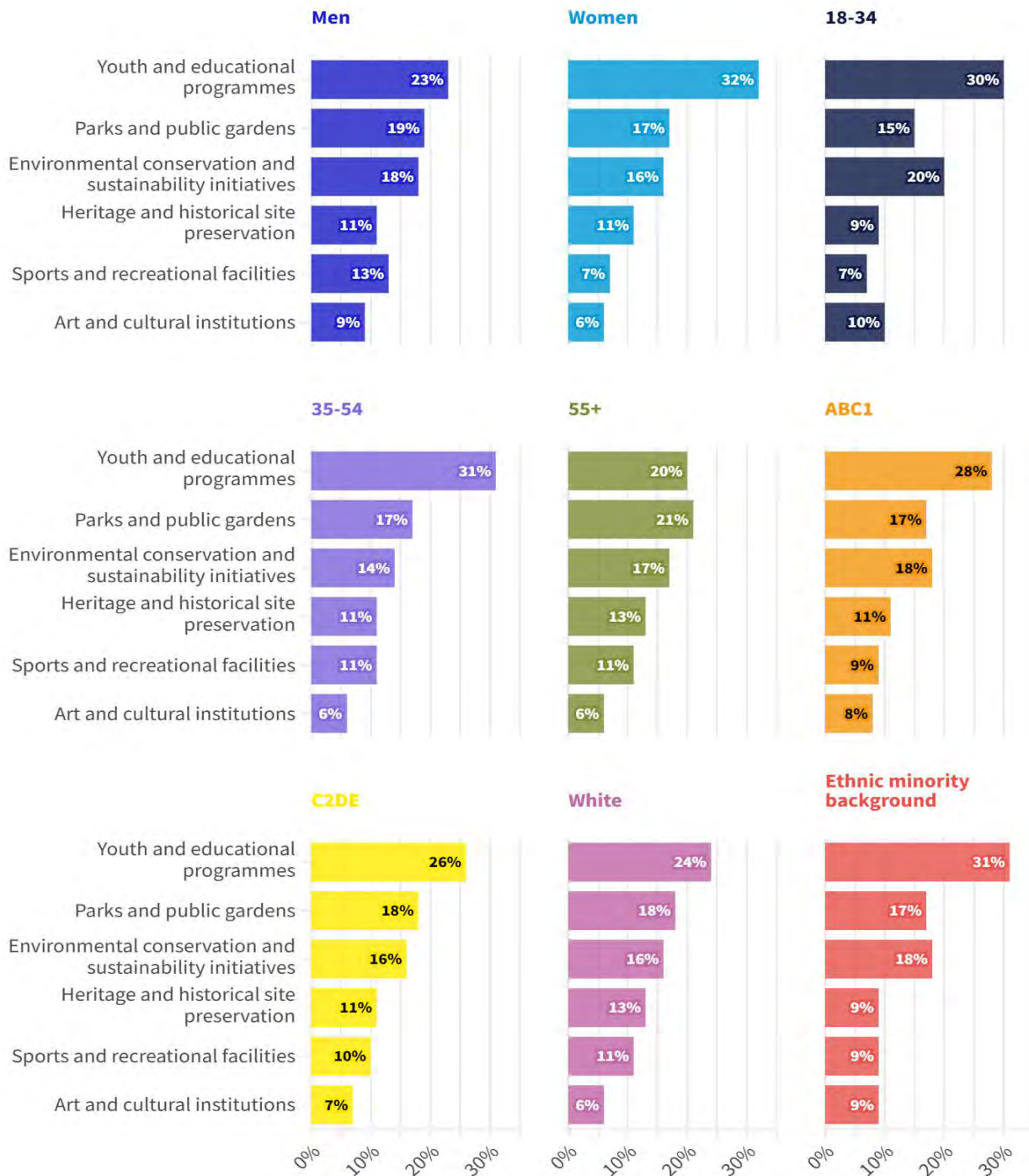
RECOMMENDATION

Fully embed arts and culture into the delivery of the London Growth Plan’s vision for London’s economic development.

I work in a cultural venue but ironically rarely engage in them because I don’t have much time to go to them, they don’t tend to be open in the evenings after work and I don’t like travelling into central London at the weekends.

42-year-old woman, Bromley

Figure 24: In your opinion, which of the following, if any, do you think should get priority when it comes to public funding in London?



Source: Savanta, What London Thinks (July 2024)

Tackling Attitudinal Barriers

While fewer Londoners explicitly named attitudinal factors as the key barrier for them accessing arts and culture, there is good evidence to suggest that attitudinal barriers may sit at the heart of many inequalities in arts and culture participation in the capital.

Early exposure matters

There is good evidence, reinforced by the findings from our interviews, that childhood exposure to the arts can have a powerful effect on later behaviour in terms of ongoing engagement the arts.²⁹ Many of our interviewees also emphasised the importance of the role of schools and the education system in engaging children and young people in arts and culture.

“Regular access to the arts should be compulsory in schools from the start in order to provoke curiosity and develop their experience in the arts. That way over the years you have people interested in working in the arts which in time creates better diversity and representation and thus builds wider audiences.”

43-year-old woman, Barnet

“The decline of arts activity in schools and school visits mean that there’s a generation of kids who have not had the experience of going to the Natural History Museum or the V&A.”

Londoners also strongly support the role of education in cultural engagement, with more than a quarter (28%) saying that additional public funding to improve London’s cultural offer should be channelled into youth and educational programmes. In contrast, only 8% wanted additional funding invested in arts and cultural institutions.

National policy on the role of the schools in supporting engagement in the arts has varied over the years. In the 1970s, the Arts Council of Great Britain heavily prioritised the role of arts in education, resulting in the formal inclusion of art and music performance and appreciation in the school curriculum. However, the 1988 Education Reform Act led to an uneven distribution of arts in school, with some schools reducing or cutting arts programmes, and began to charge for them as an extracurricular activity. A shift in policy from the 1990s saw a shift away from arts appreciation towards a more instrumentalist human capital-driven approach which emphasised ‘creativity’ in terms of the pipeline of creative skills into the economy.

Since 2010, creative and cultural education has been relatively deprioritised within education, with substantial drops in arts GCSE entries and the cessation of national arts education programmes.³⁰ Several interviewees highlighted the long-term impact of these changes in policy, with some boroughs investing in initiatives to achieve similar aims but others unable to do so due to funding constraints since 2010.

RECOMMENDATION

Promote the value of the arts in the national core curriculum.

Case Study: 11 by 11

The 11 by 11 programme run by Islington Council, which brings together schools, cultural organisations and council services to enable children and young people to ensure that all children and young people in Islington experience 11 cultural experiences by Year 11. The initiative tailors activities for children and young people who are most in need or disadvantaged, and has brokered 46,000 free cultural experiences for young people in Islington schools between 2019-2023.



© CDC

Community-led programming

A lack of diversity among those producing culture is a key driver of the gap between the kinds of arts and cultural offer that would be engaging for Ethnic Minority audiences and the mainstream offer.³¹³²

Text BoxIn our polling, respondents from an Ethnic Minority background were twice as likely as those from a White ethnic background to highlight a potential attitudinal barrier, stating that more events that reflect the diversity of London's population amongst the things that would be most likely to make them more likely to attend, with almost a quarter doing so (23%) compared to 11% of White respondents. Younger Londoners were also more likely to rank this factor highly, with around a fifth of those aged under 54 doing so compared to just 10% of those aged 55+.

These findings correspond with Crossick and Kasynska (2016) who highlight that what is perceived as a lack of engagement amongst Ethnic Minority communities could be due to cultural tastes, preferences, engagement and production that is not recognised within the mainstream.³³

RECOMMENDATION

● *Institutions should work hand-in-hand with communities so that cultural programming reflects London's diverse audiences, especially those least represented in the arts and cultural sector.*

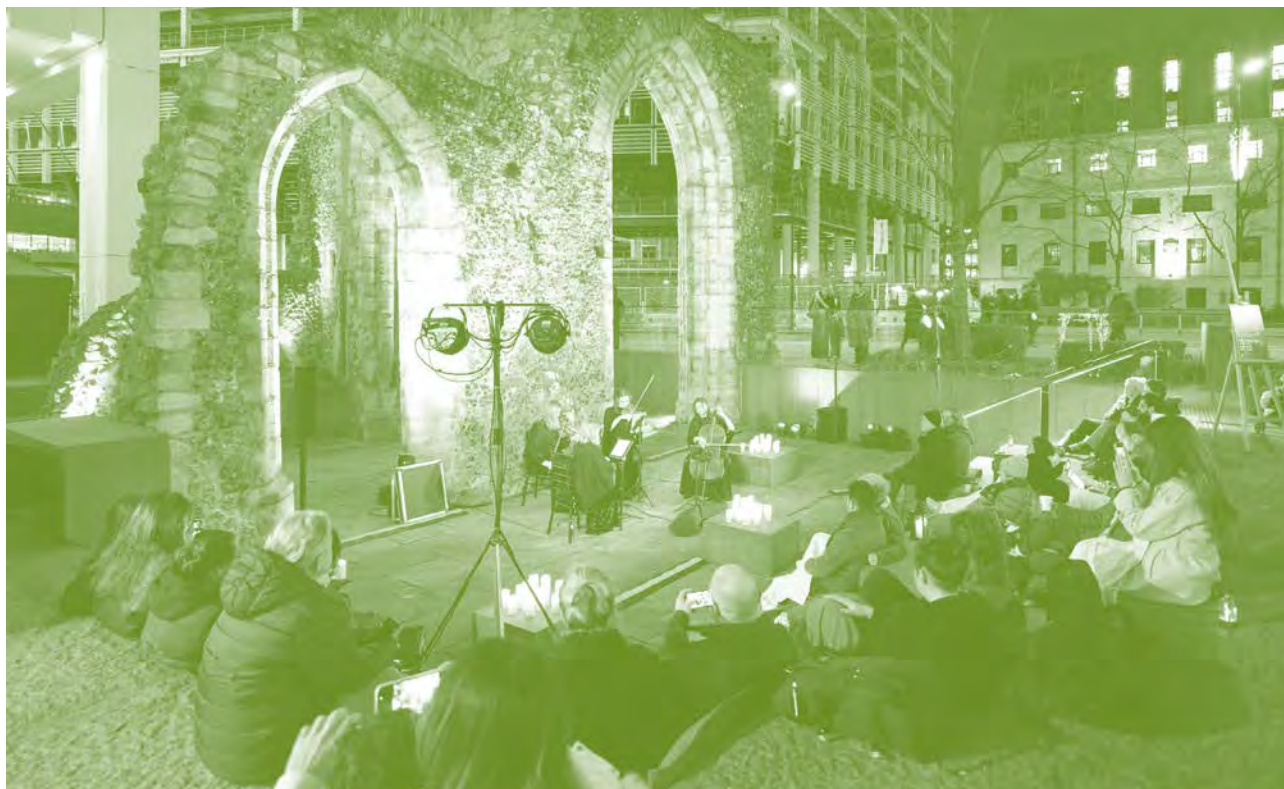
Case Study: Creative Barking and Dagenham

Barking and Dagenham has some of the lowest levels of arts and cultural participation of any local authority in the country.

Creative Barking and Dagenham, funded by Arts Council England, delivers site-specific events and projects, summer festivals, artist residences in areas with low cultural provision, commissioning programmes to support professional development, learning and action research, and a small commissioning fund to support marketing or artists costs for events.

The initiative develops its offer with and through local communities through more than 100 local Cultural Connectors who run and design the programme who are recruited through community events and similar.

The programme has mobilised more than 100 locals as Cultural Connectors, delivered more than 800 creative events, workshops and activities, with 233 volunteers, with events attended by 32,000 participants.



© Mikey LF Lee

“Culture organisations focus too much on deciding what to produce, then selling it, rather than inviting the public to influence what they produce.”

London Cultural Practitioner

Our interviews also highlight the importance of curatorial control with regard to broadening access. Initiatives which meaningfully enable different communities to influence and design the cultural offer were seen as much more likely to be effective in widening participation.

This links to the importance of arts and cultural initiatives being well-embedded and connected with local communities in effectively expanding engagement, often over a considerable period of time. `

Smaller and grassroots organisations were seen as especially important for this process, with larger institutions and public bodies (e.g. local authorities, Arts Council England) playing an enabling and catalysing role, rather than attempting to replicate or displace the grassroots activities of smaller organisations. Arts Council England’s Cultural Compacts initiative demonstrates a promising approach to the co-design of place-based cultural programming with the potential to centre smaller organisations and augment their work.³⁴ Interviewees noted also the challenges of delivering this kind of embedded and long-term collaborative work in the context of ongoing funding constraints.

RECOMMENDATION

Major institutions should act as champions and enablers for local and grassroots organisations in order to reach Londoners who are most marginalised from the Arts.

Key Takeaways

Overall, our research has highlighted that practical issues are of paramount importance when thinking about how to encourage wider engagement with arts and culture in London; issues like cost and convenience are what spring to mind for most Londoners when asked what might encourage them to access arts and culture more.

RECOMMENDATION

The Arts Council should build on their cultural compacts model to deeply engage with and respond to the priorities and preferences of local organisations and communities.

However, digging deeper, the reality is more complex: practical, attitudinal and functional barriers to engagement with culture interact with and reinforce one another, and tackling the more apparent or intuitive barriers may not help as much as we might expect.

For example, even if the communities who are the target of the effort report cost as a key barrier, discounted tickets aimed at widening participation may just end up simply reducing the cost of attendance for people who would have attended anyway if any underlying attitudinal or functional barriers are not addressed – ‘dead-weight’ financially, and potentially inequitable.



© Samuel Regan Asante

This means that initiatives to increase engagement and access to arts and culture must successfully identify and engage with how barriers cross-cut and feed into one another; this would both minimise dead-weight and, crucially, could create positive feedback loops. For example, an effort to tackle a practical barrier (e.g. reducing the cost or inconvenience of attending), if successful in encouraging a first-time attendee who then has a positive experience, may reduce an attitudinal barrier such as feeling that a specific kind of arts or cultural event is 'not for people like me'.

The complexity and specificity of these barriers highlights the importance of an audience-led approach, and for arts organisations and funders to build a deep understanding of London's communities and their preferences to tackle these interconnected barriers.

“Artists will always make art, whatever their situation, but we cannot take these talents for granted. If we want there to be a thriving arts and cultural scene, we have to ensure it is accessible for both the makers and participants.”

48-year-old woman, Croydon

Chapter 5

What might the solutions for London be?



Based on our review of the evidence, input from experts from across London's cultural scene, and the perspectives of Londoners, we propose the following recommendations to help ensure that more Londoners get to reap the benefits of London's world-class cultural offer.



© Tiyapo Moseki

Recommendations for national government

1. Introduce a national Arts Pass for U-25s to ensure every young person regardless of background can enjoy the best of London and the UK's arts and culture scene.

Enabling access and engagement with arts and culture at a younger age is crucial for supporting creativity, critical thinking and with arts and culture longer-term. The Government should consider the development of a new Arts Pass for all under-25s to reduce the cost of attending cultural events for all young people to ensure access for all, regardless of background.

The Government should consider the development of a new Arts Pass for all under-25s to reduce the cost of attending cultural events for young people. Working in a similar way to the u-25 Railcard, the Arts Pass would grant young people discounted entries to ticketed arts and cultural events, institutions and other related engagements, with the purpose of expanding access to the arts for young people who may otherwise be unable to pay to attend.

This programme should be delivered in partnership with arts and cultural institutions to further expand the awareness of the UK's cultural offer, particularly targeted at supporting greater engagement from marginalised and under-served communities.

2. Promote the value of the Arts in the national core curriculum to nurture future talent and ensure equality of access to arts and culture.

Art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts should form an integral part of education to ensure every child receives a strong base of knowledge and experience in the arts.

Successive changes to the primary and secondary school curriculum implemented since the 1980s has seen multiple reviews of the purpose of core subjects, with the result that arts and cultural activities in schools have been comparatively under-resourced and undervalued as a core part of children and young people's educational development. While art and music are mandatory subjects for key stages 1 to 3, deprioritisation of creative subjects, financial pressures on schools and falling investment in arts education has seen GCSE and A-Level entries in related subjects decline by 47% and 29% since 2010, respectively. This in turn has impacted the take-up of arts subjects at higher education level with funding for courses cut by 50% since 2010. ³⁵

This decline risks undermining the UK's competitiveness in arts and creative businesses by reducing the pipeline of prospective new creative sector workers, while reducing the opportunities afforded to young people from marginalised backgrounds to engage with the arts.

3. **Restore arts funding to local government to 2010 levels and invest in Arts Council England funding for London to kick-start growth and increase inclusivity.**

The Government's announcement in February 2025 of a £270m Arts for Everyone funding package is a positive sign for the cultural sector. However local government has a vital role to play in local arts and cultural programming remains under intense pressure to deliver essential statutory services with reduced resources, while discretionary spending on programmes for arts, culture, leisure and sport has fallen by more than £2.3bn in real terms since 2010³⁶, and shorter-term funding pots such as the Levelling Up Fund and Shared Prosperity Fund have replaced stable and consistent funding streams. Further, while the most recent spending round under the last Government saw Arts Council funding rise nationally, London's share of investment fell.

Dedicated funding for arts and culture programmes in London's local government and investment in London's world-leading arts and cultural scene through an uplift to Arts Council England funding would have direct benefits for the arts ecosystem nationally, as well as driving the government's mission of kick-starting economic growth.

Crucially, it will also enable better engagement with communities often left out of the capital's cultural scene, with local government and London's institutions more able to adequately resource local arts organisations and invest bringing communities into the design and delivery of local cultural programming, delivered for the long-term. The wider economy too The global appeal of London's destination economy is much down to London's passionate and hardworking cultural workforce, working hand in hand with international talent. London's local government should be able to reinvest the fruits of these efforts, not just for the benefit of Londoners themselves, but for the wider economy too.

4. **Allow the Greater London Authority to explore the implementation of a Tourist Tax to help invest in London's arts and cultural scene.**

National government should grant the Greater London Authority the powers to explore implementing a tourist tax which, given the outsized role of arts and culture in driving tourist spend and footfall, could be partially hypothecated for re-investment to support arts and culture in London. This would allow for local government to deliver arts and culture programmes in their local areas, supporting stronger engagement from communities with marginalised backgrounds.

The design and method of such a levy should be within the scope of local authorities and regional authorities to consider, including whether the Greater London Authority should be included as a part-recipient or wholly responsible for the tourist tax's implementation.

Recommendations for regional and local government

1. Ensure arts and culture are at the heart of implementing the London Growth Plan's vision to build a fairer, safer, greener and more prosperous London.

It is very positive that the new London Growth Plan commits to maintaining London's global cultural status and foregrounds the importance of investing in culture as a key driver of the experience economy and visitor destinations that are critical to London's economic growth. It's important that the implementation of this vision also helps deliver the commitment at the heart of the Mayor's 2018 Culture Strategy that every Londoner deserves the chance to enrich their lives through culture; for example, by ensuring that the upcoming Inclusive Talent Strategy helps more Londoners, particularly those from culturally excluded backgrounds, access and succeed in the city's arts and cultural sector.

2. Reinvigorate local authority culture strategies to plan for the long term to foster local cultural activity.

The success of the London Borough of Culture initiatives highlights the impactful role that local authorities have to play in broadening access to engagement in the arts by cultivating a rich, diverse and geographically dispersed local arts and arts and cultural scene.

All London local authorities should consider renewing or updating their local cultural strategy or – if one is not in place – prioritising the development of a local arts and culture strategy devised in dialogue with local communities, arts practitioners and institutions, drawing on best practice and insight tools such as the Arts Council's Culture and Place Data Explorer and Joint Cultural Needs Assessment. Strategies should be long-term, setting a clear multi-year direction of travel and offering certainty to local partners rather than being restricted to time-limited set-piece events or initiatives. Culture programmes and their marketing should be delivered strategically in partnership and alignment with local cultural institutions and businesses to ensure engagement is effective and purposeful.

Recommendations for institutions

1. The Arts Council should build on their Cultural Compacts model to deeply engage with and respond to the priorities and preferences of local organisations and communities.

As an arms-length organisation of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Arts Council England works closely with London's local and regional governments and supports structures that build local cultural capacity (e.g. local culture networks) and has targeted much-needed investment in some of the London boroughs with the lowest participation in arts and culture through their Priority Places Programme (e.g. Barking & Dagenham).

To go further and ensure that funding and investment decisions are led by the priorities and preferences of London's local organisations and communities, the Arts Council should consider establishing local partnerships which centre local arts and community organisations and have the autonomy and resources to engage deeply with local communities and invest for the long-term. This could build on the Cultural Compacts model and allow for a closer, deeper and cooperative relationship between funders and local creative organisations and other partners (e.g. local authorities), enabling greater agency and trust in funding decisions and in delivery of a strategy which is more responsive to the needs and audience preferences of London's communities.

2. Arts organisations should work hand-in-hand with communities so that cultural programming reflects London's diverse audiences, especially those least represented in the arts and cultural sector.

Too many Londoners, particularly those from more marginalised backgrounds, do not see themselves in the world-class cultural institutions the city is home to. Major institutions should leverage their resources and reputation to work hand-in-hand with local residents to create novel, high-quality and popular programming. This should become the norm rather than the exception. This should also be the norm for all arts and cultural providers, including those directly managed by the public sector (e.g. local authority-run arts centres), and organisations will reap the benefits in increased engagement. To better address barriers to access and engagement in local communities, institutions can work to build a culture of audience review to identify gaps in their programming exists, where communities are less represented, and how can improve access and engagement.

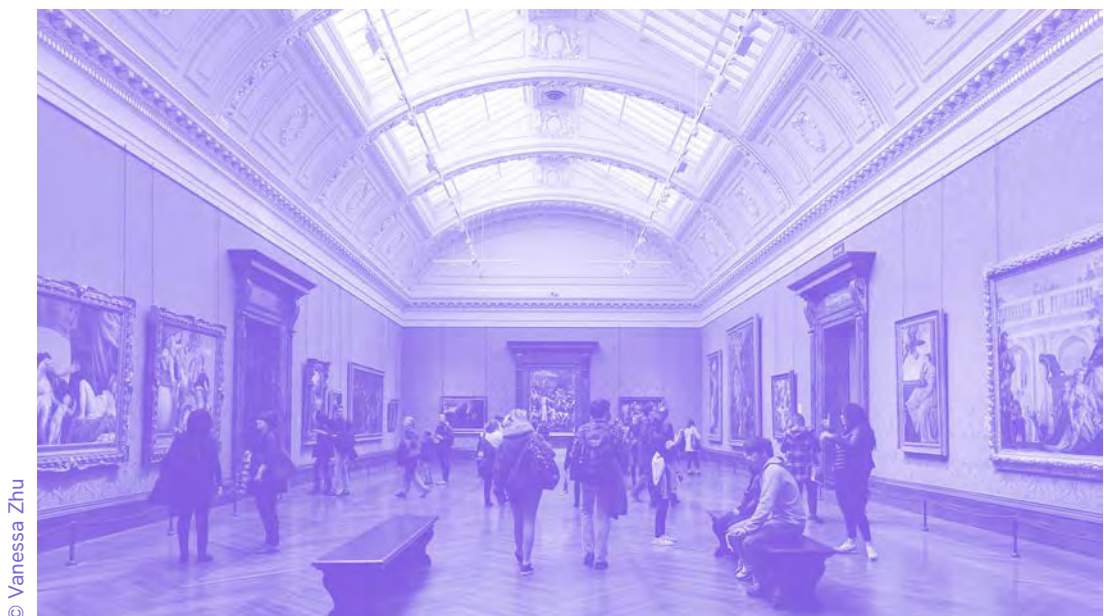
3. Institutions and their partners should act as champions and enablers for local and grassroots organisations in order to reach Londoners who are most marginalised from the arts.

London's major arts and cultural institutions are decades or even centuries old. Their success and longevity are integral to London's arts and culture sector and today work hand-in-hand with London's businesses, local governments, and civil society organisations to deliver world-class arts offerings.

Initiatives such as East Bank are a welcome example of London's heritage institutions seeking to do more to reach the city's historically underserved geographies and communities. Institutions should work with their place-based partners, such as London's BIDs, to collaborate with long-standing grassroots and community organisations through convening, place-making and resource-sharing to enable organisations and creators to thrive in their local communities.

4. Arts organisations should take an audience-first approach, using data, insight and collaboration to more effectively to reach and engage diverse audiences.

Our analysis highlights how audiences increasingly find out about arts and cultural offerings through diverse channels which vary significantly across London's various communities and demographics. There is an important opportunity for cultural organisations, practitioners and funders to use consumer insights about where different audiences get their information and select channels and tailor promotional content to best engage them, especially amongst those less likely to engage, and for cross-promotion to maximise awareness and engagement.



© Vanessa Zhu

Endnotes

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