



Glow Wild 2025, RGB Kew © Ollie Dixon

**FROM**

**WEST SUSSEX**

**TO THE WORLD**

Creativity and Culture in West Sussex  
- a strategic snapshot, Spring 2026

# INTRODUCTION

## Culture as infrastructure for West Sussex

Creativity and culture form a golden thread through West Sussex. From grassroots festivals in towns and villages to cultural organisations with global reach, West Sussex significantly shapes the cultural, economic, and social landscape of Sussex.

This prospectus has been developed by creative professionals living and working across West Sussex. It sets out how culture already contributes to economic growth, skills development, public health, environmental resilience and community cohesion, and why these contributions matter now, at a moment of significant change across Sussex.

As Sussex prepares for a new Mayoral Combined Authority and long-term funding decisions, this prospectus sets out a clear case: **culture in West Sussex already underpins many priorities a Mayor will be responsible for delivering**: economic growth, health and wellbeing, skills, environmental resilience, community safety and place.

West Sussex Creatives map Oct 2025





Creative Crawley, Around the Lake Festival, Sonya Sabri Company, Tilgate Park, © Ian Greenland

Embedding culture into future funding and policy decisions will make them easier, more resilient and more effective to deliver. Three clear strategic priorities for investment in West Sussex arts and culture have been identified, all of which would support a new Mayor to achieve their aims.

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**Culture here is not discretionary.**

**It is part of the system that enables Sussex to grow, adapt and thrive.**

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# WE DRIVE INNOVATION AND RESILIENCE

West Sussex is home to cultural and creative institutions that operate at national and international scale, also delivering innovation across technology and the creative economy.

# Supporting growth, cross-sector innovation and productivity

The creative industries has been identified as one of eight priority growth sectors (known as the 'IS8') within the Industrial Strategy 2025. The focus is on high-growth areas including, gaming & interactive media, music & audio production, performing arts and film & television.

Where individual growth sectors are particularly valuable is at the intersection with others, for example the strategy priorities around clean energy and the digital and technology sector.

For example, the **University of Chichester's Createch** facilities bring together creativity, engineering and technology, offering industry-standard production spaces including sound stages, motion capture, VFX, games design and esports. These facilities support convergent skills essential to the future economy.

**Gatwick Production Studios** in Crawley has one of Europe's leading Dolby Atmos facilities for mix and mastering. **Creative Assembly** is headquartered in Horsham and is the creator of the multi-million selling *Total War* franchise, and the critically acclaimed *Alien: Isolation*, and contributes to a growing cluster of film, television and games production.

**Creative Technology**, headquartered in Crawley and backed by the global NEP Group, delivers large-scale live event technology for projects including Eurovision and the FIFA World Cup, bringing international investment, specialist skills and global reputation into Sussex.

People are invested in the West Sussex story. **Sussex Film Office** has supported 6,500+ productions since 2016, generating £120m+. West Sussex's proximity to London and access via Gatwick Airport, plus film-friendly local processes, brings productions from outside the bottlenecks of central London.

These assets, and hundreds of others, position West Sussex as a driver of regional environmental, digital and economic innovation, supporting IS8 growth sectors that a new mayoral authority will rely on to deliver productivity and resilience.

## We underpin economic growth and resilience

**49.7%**

of Creative and Cultural job postings across Sussex in 23/24 were for jobs in West Sussex.

**50.2%**

of Digital job postings across Sussex in 23/24 were for jobs in West Sussex. (Future Skills Sussex, Sussex Local Skills Improvement Plan, Sussex Chamber of Commerce report, Jan 2025)





# YOUNG PEOPLE, SKILLS AND WELLBEING

Culture in West Sussex plays a critical role in developing skills, supporting young people's wellbeing and strengthening pathways into work, particularly in sectors aligned with future economic prosperity.

# A delivery mechanism, not an add-on

**Chichester College Group** (CCG) is the largest Further Education provider in Sussex, with five of seven campuses based in West Sussex. Its industry-leading apprenticeship programmes, rated Outstanding by Ofsted, supply technical and creative skills to regional and national employers.

**Theatre Inc**, delivered through CCG, supports performers with disabilities and additional needs to develop creative, technical and independent life skills. This programme demonstrates how cultural education contributes directly to inclusive employment and reduced long-term dependency.

**Chichester Festival Youth Theatre**, the largest regional youth theatre in the UK, works with more than 850 young people each week across seven locations. Its reach shows how cultural participation builds confidence, communication, teamwork and progression into further education and employment.

Cultural organisations in West Sussex collectively engage with every school in the county, aligning creative learning with skills development, wellbeing and community safety. **West Sussex Music** alone reaches 96% of schools.



Chichester Festival Youth Theatre, Running Wild. © Mike Eddowes

This is also a place where cultural opportunity is designed for young people who are too often missed, including those with learning differences, additional needs and disability. In Worthing, **The SAND Project** and **SuperstarArts** build real-work learning and routes into paid employment by creating enterprises where trainees can develop practical skills through production, business development and creative work.

This also shows up in public, accessible initiatives that help young people feel seen and valued. **The Bognor Regis Youth Art Project** transformed the hoardings at Waterloo Square into a free outdoor public exhibition, showcasing work by young and emerging local artists as part of a wider youth cultural programme in Arun.

Cultural infrastructure reduces pressure on education, health and employment systems by supporting early intervention, engagement and progression, outcomes that become harder and more expensive to achieve without it.

The 2023 Creative Industries Sector Vision from DCMS highlighted that for every 10 jobs in the Creative Industries 7 others are supported elsewhere in the local economy, amplifying the impact of skills investment.

Across all of Sussex, there are over 10,225 creative businesses employing around 54,428 people, with an additional 21,000 freelance creatives. **This sector saw rapid growth: 44% increase in output between 2012 and 2024.**

(Unleashing Potential, 2025)



West Sussex Music cornet group at West Park



# CULTURAL EXPORTS AND INWARD INVESTMENT

Culture created in West Sussex reaches global audiences and functions as a powerful signal of place quality, confidence and creativity, all of which influence investment decisions.

# Reputation as economic leverage

**Chichester Festival Theatre** is a nationally significant institution attracting visitors, artists and funders from across the UK and internationally. Their programmes position West Sussex as a place where high-quality contemporary culture is made and experienced.

Flagship cultural events drive major economic impact; for example, **Goodwood Festival of Speed** attracts 200,000+ visitors annually, and Goodwood's wider events portfolio, including a sculpture park and new **Goodwood Art Foundation**, contributes around £323m to the wider West Sussex, Hampshire and Surrey economy.

**Knepp Estate** and **Sussex Bay** are globally recognised rewilding and conservation projects that have transformed understanding of nature recovery, biodiversity, land and ocean use. It's work that influences environmental policy and practice far beyond Sussex, demonstrating how cultural approaches to land, sea and landscape can support climate resilience and economic sustainability. Knepp's story is being told all around the world through books and an award-winning film, and through partnerships with dozens of high profile artists, sculptors and makers.

**Wakehurst, managed by Kew**, is a world-leading botanic garden and home to the Millennium Seed Bank, the world's largest wild seed store. Scientists use the landscape as a living laboratory to explore nature-based solutions and strengthen the resilience of UK and global ecosystems. Its annual *Glow Wild* light trail, has installation co-production at its heart working with an ecosystem of Sussex-based artists, digital producers and the community.

**AudioActive** uses music to deliver social change while developing emerging talent. Artists supported through its programmes, including Rizzle Kicks, Celeste & Arrdee have gone on to critical acclaim winning major accolades including BBC Sound of 2019 & 2020 and various BRIT & Ivor Novello awards.



Wakehurst Summer, Visual Air 2024 © RBG Kew

West Sussex has produced globally recognised artists including The Cure, Billy Idol, Romesh Ranganathan and Richard Osman, and is home to celebrated figures such as Kate Winslet, Julia Donaldson, Dame Julie Walters, Keith Richards and Wayne Hemingway. Rising stars also include Turner Prize nominee Delaine De Bas, Sky Portrait Artist of the Year Wendy Barratt, Aesthetica Prize 2025 shortlisted Sarah Maple, musician Abi Flynn and indie rock band Royal Blood.

These cultural exports build reputational capital that supports tourism, inward investment and business confidence. Under devolution, this reputational strength becomes an economic asset that benefits Sussex as a whole.



Staying visitors in Sussex are an important driver of value and a significant source of potential growth. Although they represent just 11% of visits, they contribute 50% of all tourism spending. Notably at only 2% of total visits, those from overseas delivered 19% of all spend.

(Experience Sussex, Visitor Economy Strategy for Growth 2024-2034)

## £2 billion visitor economy

Cultural tourism is vital to West Sussex. In 2022, the county's visitor economy supported over 36,000 jobs and was valued at approximately £2.0 billion.

(West Sussex Economic Strategy 2025–2035).

# HERITAGE, REGENERATION AND PLACE

Heritage and contemporary cultural practice in West Sussex play a central role in shaping places that are safe, attractive and economically viable.

# Reducing risk and protecting common benefit

Historic assets, from Roman remains to cathedrals and cultural landscapes, support recognition, wellbeing and connection to place. **The Weald & Downland Living Museum** combines conservation with active learning, preserving traditional skills while contributing to the social and economic life of the **South Downs National Park**.

Contemporary culture strengthens regeneration by building identity and public confidence. The designer and West Sussex resident Wayne Hemingway MBE's culture-led approach to placemaking demonstrates how creative practice can shape housing, public realm and town-centre renewal. **Hemingway Design's** collaborative work with **Creative Crawley** and West Sussex-based **always possible** on a Cultural Quarter feasibility study in Crawley shows how culture can de-risk regeneration and attract long-term investment.

**Worthing Theatres' and Museum's** summer outdoor circus programme has directly supported town-centre vitality, while **Crawley's Creative Playground** murals programme has reduced crime and improved perceptions of safety in specific neighbourhoods.

As part of a £12 million public realm improvement under the Worthing Growth Deal, West Sussex County Council included a community art project in the upgrade of Worthing's station front. The project commissioned local artists (**Artyface** and **Alice Mara**) to work with schools and community groups to create four large mosaic roundels now installed at the station entrance.

Evidence from regeneration practice nationally shows that schemes without cultural anchoring are more likely to struggle with take-up, identity and public support. Culture reduces these risks.

The South Downs National Park is the most populous of the UK's National Parks, with 117,000 residents and 2.2 million people living within 5km of its boundary. The 2025 Economic Profile of the South Downs National Park shows how it continues to defy assumptions about rural economies. It is home to a diverse and resilient business community; one that mirrors the dynamism of the South East while staying deeply rooted in place. Atypical for a National Park, the South Downs National Park's economy is not dominated by a single sector. It is instead composed of professional services, land-based production, creative industries, and high-value tourism. This diversity is its strength.

There are 36 libraries in West Sussex. A typical branch library in England provides approximately **£1million in social value** annually. The research, which aligns with HM Treasury 'Green Book' standards, calculated value through user interviews, library visits, and statistical analysis, calculated a return on investment of at least six times the operating cost. (Libraries Connected: The Power of Prevention, 2025)

# GRASSROOTS CULTURE AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

West Sussex has a strong voluntary and grassroots arts sector, including amateur theatre, community choirs, festivals and local cultural events across urban, coastal and rural areas.

These activities strengthen social networks, reduce isolation and support mental wellbeing. Volunteering and participation in cultural activity are consistently linked to improved wellbeing and social trust, outcomes that reduce long-term pressure on health and social care services.



# Prevention in plain sight

Grassroots culture often reaches people who are least likely to engage with formal systems, acting as an early intervention that prevents problems escalating.

These activities matter, as part of a regional policy framework, because they do three things that expensive systems struggle to do:

1. Keep people connected (reducing isolation)
2. Create shared pride and identity (supporting cohesion)
3. Build local capability (volunteering, leadership, skills)

Heritage participation is a strong example. **Worthing Theatres and Museum's** Highdown Big Dig in 2025 was a community excavation delivered with the National Trust and **Worthing Archaeological Society**, drawing in members of the public as active participants in local heritage. Hundreds of people took part in this form of place stewardship over a single weekend, building the kind of civic engagement that makes regeneration and placemaking visible.

**Horsham District's Year of Culture** 2019, featured a community-wide environmental art project. Nineteen public locations (shops, libraries, a bandstand etc) across Horsham were 'ocean-bombed' with eco-themed art installations created by intergenerational groups (from WI knitting circles to primary school children).

With a devolved tier of Sussex political decision-making, focused on prevention and value for money, this informal cultural infrastructure is a critical asset.

In Crawley, reported anti-social behaviour fell by almost 15% in 2023, alongside reductions in domestic abuse and a near doubling of burglary solve rates, following investment by the Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner in prevention and diversionary activity, including youth arts provision delivered by AudioActive

(Office of the Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner, 2023)

West Sussex County Council's Creating Healthy and Sustainable Places Framework (2019–2024) sets out many evidence-informed links between cultural amenities and improved community wellbeing, social cohesion and perceptions of safety, aligning planning policy with public health outcomes.



High Down Big Dig, Worthing Theatres and Museum



# DIVERSITY, COHESION AND CONNECTIVITY

Culture is one of the few forces that consistently brings people together across differences, building trust, representation and belonging. Such social cohesion, delivered through community and civic infrastructure, is vital to ensuring the legitimacy and success of devolution.

# Making devolution work locally

Crawley is one of the most ethnically diverse towns in the South East outside of London, with roughly 38% of its residents belonging to ethnic minority groups and over 90 languages spoken. **Creative Crawley** has had over £2m of investment from Arts Council England because of the strength of its community programming and visible, inclusive, cultural storytelling.

Cultural activity also links participation with transport and public services. In areas where physical connectivity is challenging, culture often provides the social infrastructure that keeps communities engaged and visible.

West Sussex has a strong network of organisations creating high-quality cultural opportunities for people of all ages with learning disabilities, neurodivergence and additional needs, not as charity 'projects', but as part of everyday community life. For example **Figment Arts** actively support people who are often left out, building pride and belonging through creative work. And **Shoreham Opportunities for Learning Differences** (SOLD) is a shop and maker gallery providing realistic work experience for adults with learning differences, building skills towards paid employment and directly selling art to the public.

Without this connective role, regional strategies risk uneven impact and weakened public confidence.

A 2025 study by Libraries Connected found that West Sussex libraries deliver nearly £220,000 of annual value in mental health and wellbeing benefits, particularly for older adults (Libraries Connected, 'The Power Of Prevention', 2025)

An NHS pilot in Burgess Hill reported a 25% reduction in GP appointments among patients who engaged with social-prescribing arts and support programs, alongside a 62% drop in reported anxiety and depression levels for those patients. (National Association of Primary Care Population Health report by Mundra, J, 2024, 'Improvement Mid Sussex Health Care part of Burgess Hill and Villages PCN.')



WSSC, Southwick Library © DCOOL



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**STRATEGIC  
PRIORITIES FOR  
INVESTMENT**

**Enabling delivery across portfolios**

# 1

## Scale creative industries employment and skills pathways

Expand Creative Industries apprenticeships and other training and employment initiatives across Sussex, building on Chichester College Group's outstanding provision. This addresses skills shortages, improves access and strengthens productivity in growth sectors.

**Supports:** economic growth, skills, productivity.

# 2

## Embed culture in cross-sector commissioning

Creative organisations already deliver outcomes across health, policing, regeneration, housing and transport. Simplifying commissioning and actively embedding cultural partners improves efficiency and outcomes across public services.


**Supports:** health, prevention, public service value.

# 3

## Place culture at the heart of regeneration and transport

Early integration of culture into regeneration and transport planning reduces risk, increases take-up and strengthens identity. Retrofitting or rebuilding culture later is more costly and less effective.

**Supports:** regeneration, housing, connectivity, confidence.



Creative Crawley; Miss High Leg Kick at Playmakers Open Day, Ian Greenland

# Contributions

This report was created with 98 creative professionals in West Sussex over four meetings during the autumn of 2025. Co-convened by Creative Crawley and Chichester Festival Theatre and organised by Creative Crawley; the meetings took place in The Nest - Chichester Festival Theatre, Unit 79/80 County Mall Shopping Centre - Crawley, Pavilion Theatre - Worthing and online. The resulting report has been drawn together and written by Creative Crawley and always possible based on notes from the meetings. Shake it Up Creative designed the document. Everyone involved has given their time for free.

The contributors are:

Chris Cook; **39 Youth Centre, Youth Centre Crawley, Crawley Community Youth Service**, Steve Goodheart, Richard Manders and Gwenn Parker-Tregoa, **Adur & Worthing Councils**, Caroline Stride; **African Night Fever**, Richard Freeman; **always possible**, Alexandra Poutsma; **Artist**, Lydia Cassidy; **Arts marketing consultant, trustee at Worthing Theatres & Museum**, Annabel Cook, **Artswork**, Adam Joolia; **AudioActive**, Robert Jude Daniels; **Bootworks Theatre**, Louise Duggan; **Chichester CAN**, Ellen Cheshire; **Chichester Cathedral**, Rhys Chant; **Chichester City Council**, Surya Supry; **Chichester College Group**, Dan Hill, Justin Audibert, Kathy Bourne, Zoe Dawson, Lucas Gill, Matt Hawksworth, Hannah Hogg, Louise Rigglesford, Dale Rooks, Jasmine Thomas, Angela Watkins & Sophie Hobson; **Chichester Festival Theatre**, Jonathan Brooker; **Chichester Film Makers**, Vicki Meddows-Smith; **Chichester Living**, Kyla Booth-Lucking; **Clear Cut**, Mark Bradbury; **Community choir leader & Little Notes**, Paul Castle & Colin Lloyd; **Crawley Museum**, Sophie Eustace; **Crawley's Creative Playground**, Alison Mansell; **Creative Assembly**, Sarah Collins; **Creative Beatz**, Louise Blackwell & Hannah Foley; **Creative Crawley**, Maija Handover; **Creative Health Practitioner**, Caroline Sharman-Mendoza; **Culture Spark**, Dr Cara Courage; **Culture, Communities & Place Consultant; Chair of Phoenix Arts**, Daran Bennett & Jade Hand; **Dance Hub**, Catherine Sleeman; **Dance practitioner**, Hannah Carter; **Ensemble Reza**, Sophie Merriner; **Fashion Designer**, David Parker; **Figment Arts**, James Leggott; **Filmmaker**, Allan Stone; **Freelance Photographer**,

Ben Cavanagh; **Future Creators**, Erica Brewster, Chloe Hemming & Maddie Pike; **Goodwood Art Foundation**, Nick Jenkins; **Horsham District Council**, Grace Thompson; **Inclusion leader for dance**, Helen Solly; **Independent artist**, Lucy Anderson Jones, Mark Elliott, Andrew Elston, Barry Foord, Charlotte Loukes, Louise Lucas, Siobhan McCormack, Sean Parker & Sue Webb; **Independent Creatives**, Julian Johnson; **Jays Paint Shop**, Susan Raikes & Marilena Reina-Trigg; **Kew Wakehurst**, Beth Williams; **Living Textiles Artist**, Darren East; **Making Theatre Gaining Skills & Bognor Regis Puppet Festival**, Kim Wright; **Movement Director**, Darren Abrahams; **One World Orchestra**, Becky Lyle, Emily Robson & Reuben Tandler; **Pallant House Gallery**, Simon Edwards; **photographer & Wordfest Crawley**, Rachael Dines & Charlotte Abbott; **Shake It Up Creative**, Daniel Li; **Sinoist Books**, Anooshka Rawden; **South Downs National Park**, Dean Spears; **Sussex Bay**, Emma Rees; **Theatre Centre**, Toby Wilsher; **Theatremaker**, Luke Osbourne; **Theatre Workshop Facilitator**, Fiona Price; **University of Chichester**, Helen McAleer; **University of Sussex**, Rebecca Main; **Weald & Downland Living Museum**, Holly Fox-Lee; **Weald Contemporary**, Tim Bolton & Laura Peters; **West Dean College**, Rebecca Savill & Mandy Smith; **West Sussex County Council**, Katie Gledhill; **West Sussex Library Service**, Paul Smyth & James Underwood; **West Sussex Music**, Yemisi Mokuolu, Amanda O'Reilly, Kevin Quilty & Reece Weight; **Worthing Theatres & Museum**.

For more information contact: [hello@creativecrawley.com](mailto:hello@creativecrawley.com)

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