

CREATIVE FUTURES

Full Framework and Strategic Delivery Plan

Creative Pathways | Creative Connections | Creative Launchpad

Prepared by Cambridge City Council Cultural Services / Creative Partnerships

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Purpose

This document sets out the strategic framework and delivery plan for Creative Futures, providing a clear structure for the programme's development, delivery and evaluation from 2026 onwards. It brings together the evidence base, programme rationale, theory of change, phased delivery model and recommended actions for each of the three Creative Futures strands: Creative Pathways, Creative Connections and Creative Launchpad. Its purpose is to support shared understanding, coordinated delivery, partnership development, fundraising and long-term decision-making, ensuring that Creative Futures is delivered as a coherent city-wide programme with clear outcomes, accountability and progression routes for children, young people and emerging creatives across Cambridge.

Contents

1. Executive summary
2. Strategic evidence base
3. Creative Futures: programme theory of change
4. Phase One: Creative Pathways
5. Phase Two: Creative Connections
6. Phase Three: Creative Launchpad
7. Cross-programme delivery framework
8. Evidence, evaluation and outcomes framework
9. Risks, mitigations and investment case
10. Source list

1. Executive summary

Creative Futures aims to establish a strong, industry leading, and locally distinctive intervention: a city-wide cultural education partnership and creative careers pipeline that supports young people from first engagement in schools through to mentoring, industry networks, paid opportunities, showcase events, funding and bursaries, access to creative workspace, and business development. The programme is a response to a growing national and local challenge; while the creative industries are one of the UK's most successful economic sectors, access to creative education and careers is becoming increasingly unequal.

The case for investment is both economic and social.

The creative industries make a substantial contribution to national prosperity, employment and innovation. As a key driver of economic growth, the sector consistently outperforms many other areas of the economy and is recognised by central government as a strategic industry with significant future growth potential.

Beyond its direct economic impact, the creative sector plays a vital role in supporting wider business activity, attracting investment, creating skilled employment opportunities and strengthening local economies. Investment in culture and creativity delivers benefits that extend well beyond the sector itself, generating positive outcomes for communities, businesses and public services.

The continued growth of the creative industries demonstrates their importance not only as a cultural asset, but as a critical component of the UK's long term economic success and competitiveness.

Despite this growth, pathways into creative careers are becoming more restricted. Since 2010, arts education has experienced a sustained decline, with reductions in arts GCSE entries, arts teacher numbers and curriculum time devoted to creative subjects. At the same time, evidence consistently shows that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented across the creative industries. Research from organisations including the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre demonstrates that creative occupations are increasingly dominated by those from more affluent backgrounds, while unpaid work, limited professional networks and a lack of access to industry contacts continue to create substantial barriers to entry.

These challenges are particularly significant given the growing concerns around youth participation in education and employment. The Milburn Young People and Work Interim Report highlights that almost one million young people are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET), with lack of work experience identified as the most frequently cited barrier to employment. Young people who become disconnected from education and work are increasingly likely to remain economically inactive over the long term. Creative Futures aims to directly address these challenges by creating trusted, place-based pathways that build confidence, aspiration, social capital, industry connections and meaningful progression opportunities.

Locally, Greater Cambridge is home to a thriving and nationally significant creative and cultural sector that plays a vital role in the area's economy, identity and attractiveness as a place to live, work and visit. The sector supports a diverse ecosystem of creative businesses, skilled professionals and cultural organisations, contributing to economic growth, innovation and employment across the region.

Culture and creativity are also central to the area's visitor economy, helping to attract national and international audiences and enhancing Cambridge's global reputation. The sector's continued growth demonstrates both the strength of the local creative economy and the significant opportunities that exist for further development.

With a strong concentration of creative talent and a track record of sustained growth, Greater Cambridge is well positioned to build on its creative strengths, supporting future economic prosperity, nurturing emerging talent and ensuring the region remains a leading centre for creativity and culture.

However, significant challenges remain. While Cambridge benefits from a thriving cultural ecosystem, opportunities are not experienced equally across all communities. Young people from lower-income households, those without family connections to creative professions and those attending schools with limited cultural provision continue to face substantial barriers to participation and progression. At the same time, many creative organisations and freelancers across Cambridgeshire report challenges in developing future talent pipelines, attracting diverse entrants to the sector and sustaining creative careers in the face of rising living and operating costs.

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Creative Futures aims to address these interconnected challenges through a coherent, long-term talent development ecosystem. It combines cultural entitlement and creative learning in schools, mentoring and industry exposure, progression networks, paid opportunities, professional development and entrepreneurship support. In doing so, it bridges three critical gaps identified across local and national evidence: access to creative experiences and education, access to professional networks and social capital, and access to structured pathways into sustainable creative careers.

The programme therefore represents more than a cultural intervention. It is an economic development initiative, a social mobility programme and a future workforce strategy for one of Greater Cambridge's most important growth sectors. By investing in Creative Futures, partners will help ensure that the region's rapidly expanding creative economy is supported by a diverse, skilled and locally connected pipeline of future talent, while simultaneously improving life chances, strengthening communities and contributing to the long-term prosperity of the region.

The recommended proposed model is to deliver under three umbrella strands of Creative Futures, each with a clear role: Creative Pathways as the cultural education partnership; Creative Connections as the structured mentoring and networks bridge for 16-25-year-olds; and Creative Launchpad as the emerging artist and creative enterprise progression offer. Together they form a coherent pipeline from first exposure to career entry and early-stage professional sustainability.

Strand	Primary Purpose	Delivery Model
Creative Pathways	Cultural education, creative careers exposure and subsidised cultural experiences through schools.	Move from pilot to embedded city-wide entitlement; extend into primary and post-16 settings; formalise school brokerage, travel subsidy and work experience pipelines.
Creative Connections	Mentoring, networks and social capital for 16-25-year-olds from underrepresented backgrounds.	Launch in January 2027 with Form The Future leading mentor/mentee recruitment and Creative Mentor Network delivering the mentoring model, training and framework.
Creative Launchpad	Emerging artist support, creative enterprise development and local workforce retention.	Create a coordinated early-career support platform of bursaries, workspace access, training, coaching, showcasing and commissioning routes.

2. Strategic evidence base

Arts education and social mobility

The national evidence shows a long-term erosion of arts education in state schools. Since 2010, there has been a 48% decline in arts GCSE entries in England, alongside schools no longer offering some arts subjects at all: 84% enter no pupils for Dance GCSE. The Cultural Learning Alliance report adds that the number of arts teachers fell by 21% between 2011/12 and 2022/23, and that Key Stage 4 Drama taught hours fell by 30% over the same period.

This contraction matters because arts-rich education builds confidence, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving and teamwork. These are not peripheral benefits: they are the transferable skills that young people need for wellbeing, attainment and future work. Where school provision shrinks, families with money and networks can purchase enrichment privately, while disadvantaged young people lose access altogether.

The social mobility evidence is particularly relevant to creative careers. The Sutton Trust report, *A Class Act*, identifies low proportions of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds on creative degrees and shows that among creative workers aged 35 and below there are around four times as many people from middle-class origins as from working-class origins. It also highlights the continuing influence of private education and elite networks in high-profile parts of television, film and music.

Despite being one of the UK's most economically successful cities, Cambridge continues to face significant challenges around inequality and social mobility. Cambridge is identified as the most unequal city in the country by the Centre for Cities, with one in ten households earning under £16,518 annually and a Gini coefficient of 0.46

underscoring a wide income divide. These disparities manifest not only economically but in lived experience, with a 12-year difference in life expectancy between the wealthiest and poorest wards. Previous analysis also found Cambridge to have one of the lowest social mobility rankings among local authorities nationally, with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds significantly less likely to achieve strong educational outcomes or access high quality employment. Rising housing costs, concentrated deprivation in parts of the city, and unequal access to networks and opportunities continue to create barriers to progression, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage despite the city's overall economic success.

These challenges are particularly acute within the creative industries, where access to careers is often influenced by social networks, cultural capital, unpaid opportunities and geographical access to provision. As a result, young people from lower income backgrounds can face significant barriers to entering one of the UK's fastest growing sectors, despite living in a city renowned for innovation and creativity.

Evidence point	Implication for Creative Futures
Arts GCSE entries have declined by 48% since 2010.	Schools need external capacity, coordination and fully subsidised opportunities to sustain arts entitlement.
Arts teacher numbers fell by 21% between 2011/12 and 2022/23.	Partner-led workshops, CPD and practitioner brokerage help mitigate specialist capacity gaps.
The creative workforce remains socially skewed, with networks and family resources shaping access.	Mentoring, work experience and paid progression opportunities must be built into the programme, not treated as add-ons.
Creative degrees and elite creative institutions show class and private-school imbalances.	Earlier intervention is needed before post-16 and higher education choices narrow.

Young people and work

The Milburn report frames youth unemployment and inactivity as a systems problem, not a problem of individual aspiration. It identifies the steady accumulation of disadvantage, weak transitions, lack of work experience, poor access to guidance and rising mental health needs as key barriers to participation.

The most relevant findings are almost one million young people are now NEET, 61.6% of NEET young people have never had a job, only 32% of young people reported face-to-face careers advice in 2025, only 35% felt confident they had relevant work experience for employment, and lack of work experience is the single most-cited barrier to work.

Less than a third of Year 13 students have completed any work experience. Creative Futures is well placed to address this barrier locally. The cultural education partnership, Creative Pathways, builds confidence and aspiration before disengagement becomes entrenched in addition to offering work experience placements and industry days across the city to provide meaningful employer encounters. Creative Connections then converts aspiration into relationships, guidance and social capital. Creative Launchpad finally supports the transition into early creative work, freelancing and self-employment.

Barrier	Creative Futures response
Work experience depends too often on who parents know.	Creative Pathways brokers school-linked work experience and industry encounters through cultural partners.
Young people lack face-to-face careers advice and employer expectation insight.	Creative Pathways and Creative Connections provide direct practitioner contact, mentoring and structured careers learning with local, national, and international partners.
NEET status becomes harder to reverse the longer it lasts.	The programme starts early, using arts participation as a route to confidence, belonging and progression.
Mental health is an increasingly significant participation barrier.	Creative participation provides safe, expressive, relational spaces; referral/signposting protocols should be built into delivery with partners such as Creative Mentor Network.

Local Cambridge context

Cambridge combines exceptional cultural assets with uneven access. Cambridge City Council sets a vision of 'One Cambridge Fair for All' and states that culture must not remain confined to the city centre but be available to all. This aligns closely with Creative Futures' place-based model; cultural entitlement should be accessed through schools, neighbourhoods and trusted partners, not only through those who can independently navigate city-centre cultural venues.

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The local research evidence's need. 42% of Cambridge young people had not attended an arts or cultural activity in 2024 and, among those who had, school was four times more likely than any other space to be where engagement happened. Cambridge is also one of the lowest funded areas per pupil nationally, and half of state-funded secondary schools in 2024/25 had free school meal eligibility above the national average.

The statutory youth survey adds practical design insights: lack of confidence was cited by 39% as a barrier to attending groups or spaces; 27% of respondents were not very confident to join a new activity or group; transport cost was mentioned more than 100 times; and young people wanted information through a mix of channels including social media, email and posters/flyers. These findings will shape Creative Futures delivery, communications and access support.

Local indicator	Development implication
43% of young people had not attended an arts/cultural activity in the past year.	Keep Creative Pathways free whilst targeting schools and cohorts facing the greatest barriers.
School is four times more likely than any other space to be where cultural engagement happens.	Use schools as the primary access gateway, while building progression into venues, workplaces and creative spaces.
Transport cost is a recurring barrier.	Embed travel contributions and in-school delivery where transport limits participation. Build in online mentoring sessions as a potential alternative for 1:1 pairs.
Lack of confidence is a major barrier.	Raise visibility amongst networks, peer cohorts, and encourage Creative Futures ambassadors to reduce the social risk of first engagement. Utilise Creative Pathways to provide guided initial access to cultural venues and unfamiliar spaces.

Economic opportunity

Nationally, the creative industries are a major engine of growth. The sector employed more than 2.5 million people in 2023 and generated £119.6 billion in Gross Value Added (GVA), accounting for 5.2% of the entire UK economy. Between 2011 and 2019, the creative economy grew by approximately 45%, significantly outperforming the wider UK economy, which grew by around 17% over the same period. Government forecasts suggest the sector will contribute a further £55 billion to the UK economy by 2030 through the ambitions outlined in the UK's Creative Industries Sector Vision. Investment in culture also delivers wider economic benefits, with every £1 invested in arts and culture generating an estimated £3 of additional value through increased employment, spending and economic activity.

Locally, the need and opportunity are equally compelling. Greater Cambridge possesses one of the most significant concentrations of creative and cultural activity in the country. The sector generated an estimated £1.24 billion in Gross Value Added in 2022, representing approximately 10% of the Greater Cambridge economy, while supporting 17,130 jobs and 1,840 businesses. Creative industries activity also drives a further £475 million of annual spending in the wider economy. Culture plays a critical role in the area's visitor economy, generating £583 million in direct visitor expenditure and a further £220 million in indirect spending each year. Importantly, 78% of international visitors to Cambridge identify heritage and culture as a primary reason for visiting.

The sector's growth trajectory is strong. Gross Value Added from Greater Cambridge's creative industries increased by 43% between 2012 and 2022, closely mirroring national growth trends. Based on current projections, the sector could be worth approximately £1.7 billion by 2030 and support more than 21,000 jobs. Greater Cambridge also has a higher-than-average concentration of creative talent, with 1.56% of the workforce employed in artistic, literary and media occupations and 4.17% working in wider creative occupations, both above national averages.

This means Creative Futures is not only an access programme; it is a workforce and inclusive growth intervention. Without deliberate local talent pathways, Cambridge risks a creative economy that grows while remaining inaccessible to many local young people. Creative Futures will therefore be positioned as a social mobility, skills, cultural entitlement and inclusive economic development programme.

3. Creative Futures: programme theory of change

Inputs	Activities	Short-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Cultural partners, schools, local authority coordination, investment, funding, mentor partners, creative SMEs, universities, youth voice.	Free cultural offers, workshops, venue visits, travel subsidy, work experience, structured mentoring programmes, peer networks, bursaries, training, showcasing and workspace access.	Increased participation, confidence, career visibility, mentor relationships, creative portfolios and local sector connections.	Reduced access gap, stronger creative pathways, improved progression to further/higher education and creative employment, more diverse local workforce, stronger cultural ecosystem.

4. Phase One: Creative Pathways

Role and need

Creative Pathways is the foundation strand, intended to become Cambridge's cultural education entitlement for children and young people, delivered through schools and in collaboration with local and national cultural organisations, with targeted support for schools and cohorts facing disadvantage.

Cultural education has long been recognised across the UK as an essential part of a broad and balanced curriculum, but its value reaches far beyond the classroom. When young people are given meaningful opportunities to engage with the arts, something deeper happens; their confidence grows, their voices strengthen, and their connection to learning becomes more personal. Schools that weave creativity into everyday teaching often see this reflected in higher attainment.

Just as importantly, cultural education shapes who young people become. Participation in creative activity supports emotional wellbeing, builds resilience, and helps young people find ways to express thoughts and feelings that might otherwise remain unheard. Yet access to these opportunities is far from equal. For many children, especially those facing disadvantage, school is the only place where they can encounter the arts in a meaningful way. When that provision is limited, the gap widens, not just in skills but in confidence, aspiration, and sense of belonging.

However, 88% of state school teachers don't feel equipped to support students into creative roles.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review therefore marks a pivotal moment for change. With a new national curriculum on the horizon, there is a clear intention to rebalance priorities and ensure every child can access rich cultural experiences. This urgency is reinforced by the national picture: arts participation continues to decline, with GCSE entries in creative subjects reaching an all-time low in 2025.

Creative Pathways offers a timely and practical response to both national policy ambitions and local need. By creating meaningful opportunities for young people to engage with creativity, develop confidence and build pathways into future creative learning and careers, the programme helps address the barriers that prevent equal access to cultural education.

The need is clear. Schools face significant funding and curriculum pressures, expressive arts GCSE participation and teacher capacity have declined nationally, local cultural engagement remains uneven, and school continues to be the main route through which many young people in Cambridge access culture. Creative Pathways should therefore remain free to access for schools and young people, with continued priority given to state schools with higher pupil premium and free school meal indicators.

Impact to date

A total of 1,109 young people directly engaged in activity provided through Creative Pathways, 75 work experience placements were offered, 99 sessions delivered and 29 schools engaged in 2025-2026. Qualitative feedback demonstrates changes in confidence, aspiration and understanding of creative careers:

“It is so lovely to be able to take these funded opportunities and bring theatre alive for the students in our classrooms, it makes such a difference to their learning and engagement.”




"I look at actors usually and think I am nothing like them but knowing they are human just like everyone else made it feel possible for me in the future"

"This was one of the best experiences of my life. I really enjoyed meeting other young people with similar interests to mine and learning about a variety of roles in theatre and film."

"This week has been more wonderful than I could have ever imagined. A mix of tours, talks, activities, and practical workshops around all different aspects of the creative industries to inspire young people to do things which they never knew even existed. I am eternally grateful for this experience."

"One of the best courses I have ever attended for developing confidence and competence in a fully inclusive, safe space."

Phased delivery plan

Stage	Development focus	Outputs	Resource evidence
Tranche A	Embed the secondary education offer and standardise delivery.	Annual published schools pack, school needs audit, CPD programme, minimum 10 schools engaged, KPI set at 1,000 young people engaged each year, consistent evaluation template.	 Creative Pathways 25-26.pdf  Creative Pathways 26-27.pdf
Tranche B	Disseminate formal processes.	Single booking process, shared calendar, cultural leads network and steering group.	 <i>Current position</i>
Tranche C	Deepen work experience and employer encounters.	Enhanced focus on expanding equivalent framework beyond KS4 and developing partners on national scale.	
Tranche D	Extend into primary and post-16 settings.	Primary pilot offer, post-16 creative careers focus, progression referrals into Creative Connections.	
Tranche E	Sustain the future programme and legacy.	Multi-year funding agreements, published impact report, scalable toolkit for other places.	

Key actions

1. Maintain a free-to-access offer including financial travel support, using a transparent schools access policy that prioritises disadvantage.
2. Formulate a steering group: participating schools identify a lead contact, provide pupil premium context information for targeting, support evaluation, and nominate pupils for progression routes.
3. Build a school-to-sector progression pathway: offering direct pathways into work experience, Creative Connections, Arts Award or Creative Launchpad where appropriate.
4. Develop a teacher CPD programme to strengthen curriculum links, creative confidence, and careers education.
5. Enable youth voice through ambassador programmes, youth forums, and young producers, using young people to test formats, support communications and identify barriers.

Outcome area	Indicators
Access and equity	Number of schools, participants, pupil premium/postcode participation, attendance by priority schools, travel subsidy take-up.
Quality	Teacher and young people reflections, curriculum relevance, repeat school participation, qualitative feedback.
Progression	Number of pupils taking work experience, applying to Creative Connections, wider cultural partner continued engagement, cross-project participation, individual case studies, attending industry days, considering creative GCSE/A-level/FE routes.
Confidence and belonging	Pre/post confidence, sense of possibility, willingness to attend cultural venues again, youth qualitative testimony.

5. Phase Two: Creative Connections

Role and need

Creative Connections is the second strand of Creative Futures and should act as the structured bridge between cultural education, early creative aspiration and real access to creative careers. It is designed for young people aged 16 to 25 from underrepresented and lower socioeconomic backgrounds who have an interest in the creative industries but lack the professional networks, sector knowledge, confidence, work experience and family connections that often shape entry into creative work.

The programme responds to a clear access gap. Cambridge has a strong and growing creative economy, but local young people do not experience those opportunities equally. Creative Pathways is already creating early engagement and aspiration through schools. Creative Connections provides the next stage of support, turning interest into relationships, guidance, industry exposure and practical progression.

The proposed delivery model is a partnership between Cambridge City Council, [Form The Future](#) and [Creative Mentor Network](#). Cambridge City Council provides strategic leadership and alignment with the wider Creative Futures framework. Form The Future leads local mentor and mentee recruitment through its school, college, employer and careers networks. Creative Mentor Network provides the specialist mentoring model, mentor training, matching support, programme structure, relationship management, delivery resources, event management, quality assurance and impact reporting.

Evidence of need

The Sutton Trust evidence shows that 'who you know' remains a significant barrier in creative careers. Family links, parental cultural capital and the ability to absorb financial risk all shape entry and persistence. The Milburn report makes the same point for youth work more broadly: work experience now too often relies on parental networks, and young people without those networks miss out. Young people are not failing to enter creative careers because they lack talent, but because they lack access. Professional networks, role models, industry knowledge, visible routes into work and practical support are often unevenly distributed. In creative industries, 70% of jobs are not formally advertised meaning entry routes are frequently informal. This lack of social and cultural capital becomes a significant barrier.

The evidence also shows that schools and colleges cannot solve this alone. Teachers often lack the specialist knowledge and industry contacts needed to advise students on creative routes, while work experience and internships can depend heavily on family networks or the ability to take unpaid or low paid opportunities. Creative Pathways has created a pipeline of interested young people, but this interest needs structured follow-through. Without mentoring, the programme risks raising aspiration without providing the social capital and navigation support needed to turn aspiration into progression.

Creative Connections should therefore be positioned as a targeted social mobility, employability and workforce development intervention.

Barrier	Implication for Creative Connections
Who gets in	Creative careers remain socially skewed, so recruitment should prioritise young people from working class and lower income backgrounds who lack existing sector networks. This will be shaped by the Social Mobility Commission's guidance .
Careers guidance	Mentoring should give young people direct access to creative professionals who can explain routes, roles, expectations and next steps.
Work experience	The programme should help mentees identify, prepare for and access meaningful work experience, shadowing, placements and paid opportunities.
Hidden job market	Mentors should help demystify informal recruitment, networking and portfolio building, while introducing mentees to wider professional contacts where appropriate.
Financial exclusion	Progression routes should avoid unpaid labour, include practical employability support and connect into paid opportunities through Creative Launchpad where possible.

Partnership aims

Specific KPIs should be agreed between Cambridge City Council, Form The Future and Creative Mentor Network before launch. In outline, Creative Connections should aim to:

- support young people from lower socioeconomic and underrepresented backgrounds in Cambridge and Cambridgeshire to gain awareness of, confidence in, and access to creative careers.
- build mentees’ confidence, employability skills, industry understanding and professional networks.
- train and equip local creative professionals as mentors, strengthening inclusive leadership across the Cambridge creative sector.
- create a visible and supported progression route from Creative Pathways into mentoring, work experience, workplace visits, paid opportunities and Creative Launchpad.
- help retain creative talent locally by giving young people a stronger reason and route to develop their creative futures in Cambridge.
- generate robust impact evidence for Cambridge City Council, funders, and the wider Creative Futures coalition.

Recommended delivery model

The recommendation is to launch a bespoke mentoring pilot cohort in 2027, pairing 10 to 14 young people with creative professionals matched to their interests, ambitions and disciplines. This cohort of mentors and mentees will be recruited by Form The Future, with programme delivery by Creative Mentor Network through their [Break the Wall](#) model, offering a focused and fundable proof of concept. This proposal provides a manageable proof of concept while still allowing meaningful impact data, case studies and partner learning. Subject to funding and mentor supply, the model should scale up in future years.

Option	Cadence	Reach	Indicative timing
Break The Wall	Fortnightly mentoring	10 to 14 pairs	January 2027 to June 2027

Component	Design recommendation
Cohort size	Begin with 10 to 14 mentoring pairs in 2027, with planned growth to larger or multiple cohorts as funding, mentor supply, reputation, and referral demand develop.
Age range	Prioritise young people aged 16 to 25, with a particular focus on transition points from school or college into further education, higher education, apprenticeships, employment, freelancing or early creative practice.
Eligibility	Prioritise young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds based on guidance provided by the Social Mobility Commission and those lacking industry connections in the creative sector.
Recruitment	Form The Future leads local recruitment through schools, colleges, employer relationships and careers networks. Creative Pathways partners should nominate young people with demonstrated interest or potential. Youth friendly open applications should also be available.
Mentor recruitment	Form The Future builds a local mentor pool across performing arts, museums, heritage, production, film, digital, festivals, technical roles, marketing, fundraising, creative enterprise, design, cultural leadership and creative businesses.
Delivery partner	Creative Mentor Network delivers the mentoring framework, mentor training, programme design, matching support, onboarding resources, relationship check ins, issue resolution, event management processes and evaluation.
Programme structure	A six month cohort should include induction, matching, regular one to one mentoring, a launch event, midpoint mixer, employability support, workplace or venue exposure, portfolio or career planning and a final showcase.
Access support	Participation should be free. Travel, access and confidence barriers should be addressed through clear communications, trusted referral routes, hybrid options where appropriate and supportive onboarding for both mentees and mentors.

Core programme deliverables

Creative Mentor Network's comprehensive delivery proposal would form the basis of the Creative Connections pilot. The programme combines structured mentoring with cohort activity, employability support, relationship management and measurable impact.

Deliverable	Purpose within Creative Connections
Launch event	Bring mentors and mentees together at the start of the programme to build energy, clarify expectations, establish boundaries and create a sense of cohort identity.
Mentor training	Provide four two-hour training sessions for mentors, supported by tailored mentor and mentee handbooks and programme resources.
Matching and onboarding	Form The Future to use a collaborative matching process informed by mentee interests, mentor expertise and support needs. Provide mentee onboarding on how to get the most from mentoring and where to find support.
Relationship management	Run structured check ins with mentors and mentees at agreed points to surface issues early, maintain quality and provide practical support.
Midpoint mixer	Create a networking moment midway through the programme so the cohort can build wider relationships beyond their own mentoring pair.
Employability support	Deliver focused sessions on CVs, LinkedIn, interviews, career planning and portfolio confidence, cohosted where appropriate with Cambridge City Council, Form The Future or local partners.
Showcase	Enable mentees and mentors to present their journey to industry professionals, celebrate progress and place young people in front of people who may offer opportunities, advice or introductions.
Impact measurement	Collect baseline and endline data across skill areas and produce an impact report that can be shared with funders, partners and the wider Creative Futures coalition.

Mentor training framework

Mentor training should be a core part of the programme, not an optional support activity. It should equip local creative professionals to understand the structural barriers facing young people, build inclusive mentoring relationships and use their own social capital responsibly to open access rather than reproduce exclusion.

Session	Focus	Intended outcome
Session 1: Understanding barriers to access	Introduces the current state of socioeconomic diversity in the creative industries, explores structural barriers and clarifies programme logistics.	Mentors understand the context of their mentees and feel confident about programme boundaries, meeting expectations and routes.
Session 2: Foundations of mentoring	Explores the role of a mentor, communication, listening, psychological safety, open questions and goal setting.	Mentors feel confident in their role and can support mentees to set meaningful goals.
Session 3: Coaching for success	Uses skills mapping, feedback, reflective practice and coaching tools such as the GROW model to support self directed learning.	Mentors understand the difference between mentoring and coaching and can use questioning and feedback to support progression.
Session 4: Inclusive leadership and social capital	Explores social and cultural capital, bias, culture add, access barriers and practical ways mentors can advocate for socioeconomic diversity.	Mentors understand how to use their networks and influence to promote inclusion, access and progression.

The Skills Network

Alongside the mentoring programme, mentees will be provided access to [The Skills Network](#); a UK-based award-winning e-learning and online self-guided training provider offering courses and professional development solutions. Access will be tailored and focussed on a bespoke offer entitled Creative Sector Employability Foundations.

For young people preparing to move into creative employment, freelance work, or further training, this will cover the transferable skills that sit underneath any creative career.

Creative Futures Framework | Delivery Plan 2026

Course	Guided learning hours
Developing personal confidence and self-awareness	3
CV writing	1
Preparing for interviews	2
Communicating with others at work	1.5
Boosting professional communication skills	2
Marketing personal brand	4
Networking	7
Boundaryless skills and careers	7
Decision making	3
TOTAL	30.5

Phased delivery plan: 2027-2032

Year	Development focus	Outputs
2027	Pilot launch and proof of concept.	Launch first Creative Connections cohort with 10 to 14 mentoring pairs, deliver mentor training, launch event, midpoint mixer, employability support and showcase, collect baseline and endline data, produce case studies and partner review.
2028	Refine referral routes and embed school, college and partner pathways.	Repeat or expand cohort, strengthen Creative Pathways referrals, build alumni peer network and formalise recruitment materials.
2029	Scale and diversify the mentor pool.	Broaden mentor recruitment across more creative disciplines, introduce employer roundtables, link mentees to workplace visits, shadowing and paid taster opportunities.
2030	Integrate with work experience, apprenticeships and Launchpad progression.	Create stronger routes into creative apprenticeships, FE and HE pathways, Launchpad micro commissions, portfolio development and paid progression opportunities.
2031 to 2032	Sustain through multi partner investment and alumni leadership.	Secure multiyear sponsorship or grant funding, publish longitudinal impact and progression data, introduce alumni mentors and youth ambassadors, consider two cohort annual delivery if demand and funding support it.

Outcome and evaluation framework

Evaluation should combine Creative Mentor Network's baseline and endline skills data with progression tracking and Cambridge City Council's [Included](#) Collective Impact Framework. The purpose is to evidence not only participation, but changes in confidence, networks, employability, career readiness and progression.

Outcome area	Indicators
Confidence and agency	Pre and post confidence in creative career planning, ability to identify next steps, confidence speaking to professionals, self-reported sense of belonging in the creative industries.
Social capital	Number and quality of mentor relationships, employer encounters, introductions, workplace visits, new professional contacts and wider network connections.
Employability and skills	CV, LinkedIn, interview readiness, portfolio progress, communication skills, goal setting, understanding of creative routes and practical next steps.
Progression	Applications to further education, higher education, apprenticeships, work experience or paid opportunities, interviews secured, Launchpad referrals, continued engagement with Creative Futures partners.
Mentor quality	Mentor training attendance, completion rates, mentee satisfaction, safeguarding compliance, mentor confidence, mentor diversity and continued mentor engagement.
System change	Growth in local mentor pool, stronger referral routes, employer participation, partner learning and evidence used for fundraising.

Strategic recommendation

Creative Connections should launch in January 2027 as the first structured mentoring and networks strand of Creative Futures. The recommended starting point is a six month pilot cohort of 10 to 14 pairs, recruited locally by Form The Future, delivered by Creative Mentor Network and with additional guided support from The Skills Network. This would provide a focused proof of concept, build the mentor infrastructure needed for future years and generate the evidence required for funders. If additional investment is secured, the model should scale towards two cohorts per year or a larger annual cohort, ensuring that more young people can move from creative interest into informed, confident and supported progression.

6. Phase Three: Creative Launchpad

Role and need

Creative Launchpad should be the progression and retention strand for emerging artists, young creatives, graduates and early-career practitioners. Its purpose is to make Cambridge a place where emerging creatives can afford to develop, test, showcase and sustain practice rather than leaving because of cost, lack of workspace, weak networks or limited paid opportunity.

The need is grounded in both opportunity and risk. Greater Cambridge has a growing creative economy, but creative careers are often freelance, insecure, network-dependent and difficult to enter without financial support; 88% of the wider region's creative industries workforce are either freelancers or a small or medium-sized enterprise. This operates unlike any other sector.

Launchpad should therefore focus on paid opportunity, workspace access, business capability and visibility.

Strategic fit

Investing in Cambridge's emerging artists and future creative workforce is essential to building a thriving, resilient creative ecology that can sustain the city's cultural and economic success over the long term. The creative industries are already one of the UK's strongest growth sectors, contributing £119.6 billion in GVA in 2023, employing more than 2.5 million people, and expected to grow by a further £55 billion by 2030. Locally, culture and creativity are also a major economic asset, with the Greater Cambridge creative and cultural sectors generating around £1.24 billion GVA in 2022, supporting 17,130 jobs and 1,840 businesses, and accounting for approximately 10% of the Greater Cambridge economy. However, this growth depends on a strong pipeline of artists, freelancers, creative entrepreneurs and cultural leaders who can develop new work, build sustainable careers, and contribute to the wider ecosystem of venues, festivals, studios, organisations and audiences. Without targeted support, emerging artists can struggle to access networks, paid opportunities, funding and grants, mentoring, creative workspace, visibility and progression routes, weakening the local talent base and making it harder for Cambridge to retain creative skills. Strategic investment in the future creative workforce will help strengthen the whole ecology, supporting innovation, collaboration and cultural production while ensuring Cambridge remains a place where creative talent can start, grow and thrive. Creative Launchpad should formalise this activity as the third umbrella strand of Creative Futures.

Launchpad should connect with creative networks, local venues, national and international creative and cultural organisations, universities, colleges, creative SMEs and workspace providers. It should also connect back to Pathways and Connections, creating alumni progression and role-model opportunities for younger participants.

Core offer

Component	Description
Open call and selection	The programme will operate through open calls with transparent selection criteria focused on artistic potential, development need, inclusion, and public engagement. Approximately twenty artists will be supported each year through one or more cohorts.
Bursaries, micro-grants and micro-commissions	Small grants, bursaries and micro-commissions will support R&D, materials, production, access costs, equipment, rehearsal, travel, portfolio development and other individual needs. Funding will be distributed flexibly, with clear inclusion criteria.
Paid R&D fellowships	Participants will be able to access paid R&D fellowships. Each fellowship will include a fee or stipend, access to workspace or studio facilities, and technical or production support where required.
Workspace access	The programme will broker access to rehearsal, desk, studio, meeting, exhibition and workshop space through partnerships with local studio providers, cultural venues, universities, makerspaces, meanwhile spaces and partner organisations. Access may be subsidised or provided in kind.
Training and professional development	Monthly workshops, clinics and training sessions will cover freelancing, tax, funding, contracts, intellectual property, marketing, producing, safeguarding, access, digital skills, fundraising, budgeting, audience development, wellbeing and sustainability.
Coaching and mentoring	Artists will receive short-term specialist coaching and mentoring from artists, producers, technicians, curators, fundraisers, commissioners and creative business mentors, tailored to their creative practice and development needs.
Administrative and production support	Dedicated administrative and production support will help artists with bookings, payments, contracts, health and safety requirements, marketing, HR, reporting and other practical requirements, enabling participants to focus on creative practice.
R&D partnerships	The programme will facilitate short research and development partnerships between artists and research, cultural, community or industry partners, supporting interdisciplinary practice, innovation and new creative collaborations.
Showcasing, commissioning and public outcomes	An annual Creative Futures showcase and public programme will present work developed through the programme, including public art and mural opportunities, festival and event slots, digital portfolios, partner venue platforms and other commissioning opportunities. These outcomes will connect artists with commissioners, funders, partners and new audiences.
Paid progression routes	The programme will create ringfenced paid assistant roles, traineeships, workshop assistant roles and youth facilitator opportunities linked to Creative Pathways and Creative Connections, helping emerging artists progress into sustainable creative work.

Phased delivery plan

Year	Development focus	Outputs
Tranche A	Create a sustainable Launchpad fund.	Secure multi-year fund to launch with public/private partners to include ringfenced funding for annual showcase, bursaries, workspace, fellowships and partner delivery.
Tranche B	Design and pilot the Launchpad offer.	Needs audit, secure partners, create frameworks for application, workspace mapping, role recruitment.
Tranche C	Formalise the professional development programme.	Monthly training calendar, alumni from Connections invited, longitudinal tracking of creative careers.
Tranche D	Embed paid progression and commissioning.	Creative assistant placements, micro-commissions through city events/public realm; sector partnership fund.
Tranche E	Scale workspace and business support.	Workspace brokerage agreement, creative enterprise clinics, targeted support for underrepresented artists.

Outcome area	Indicators
Access	Number of artists supported, demographics, postcode, disability/access needs, income/employment status.
Professional development	Training attendance, skills gains, business plans, funding applications, portfolio outputs.
Economic progression	Paid commissions, freelance income, employment, retained graduates, new collaborations, workspace access.
Cultural impact	Public engagement, neighbourhood activity, audience diversity, partner satisfaction, new work developed.

7. Cross-programme delivery framework

Function	Recommendation
Governance	Creative Pathways, Local Cultural Education Partnership, steering group, youth voice representation, Create Cambridge Cultural Compact subgroup, Cambridge City Council Youth Champions and Included Development Board.
Programme coordination	Maintain a dedicated Creative Futures coordinator function responsible for school's brokerage, partner management, evaluation and progression tracking for Pathways and Connections. Create Launchpad programme director role for oversight of emerging talent strand and alumni.
Safeguarding and inclusion	Deliver under Cambridge City Council's safeguarding policy framework across schools, mentoring, work experience and emerging artist activity.
Communications	Use youth survey insights: social media, email, posters/flyers and school-based communications, produce youth-friendly explainers, utilise existing networks such as Cambridge Arts Network and CamCreatives, Cambridge City Council communication channels and regular public facing website copy update.
Progression	Create a single Creative Futures progression register so young people can move from Pathways to Connections to Launchpad with consent and support.
Funding	Blend local authority coordination, cultural partner in-kind value, trusts/foundations, corporate sponsorship, social impact funding and strategic grants.

8. Evidence, evaluation and outcomes framework

Creative Futures should publish an annual impact report that combines quantitative participation data with qualitative case studies and progression evidence. The evaluation should not only count activity, it should evidence change in access, confidence, knowledge, skills, networks and progression.

A shared framework will also strengthen fundraising. Funders are likely to respond to a clear pipeline model, robust local need, national alignment with youth employment and social mobility policy, and evidence of partner collaboration. This needs to align with Cambridge City Council's Included Collective Impact Framework.

Level	Measures
Reach	Participants, schools, sessions, work experience placements, mentors, mentees, bursaries, training attendance, geography.
Equity	Pupil premium/FSM proxy, SEND, ethnicity, gender, postcode, first-generation HE, transport/access support, school attendance, household income at 14.
Experience	Quality ratings, safeguarding, accessibility, youth voice, partner/school feedback, attendance and completion.
Change	Pre/post confidence, aspiration, cultural engagement, careers knowledge, employability skills, networks, portfolio/readiness.
Progression	Subject choices, FE/HE/apprenticeship applications, work experience, mentoring completion, paid opportunities, commissions, employment/freelancing.

9. Risks, mitigations and investment case

Risk	Mitigation
Funding uncertainty limits continuity.	Build a three-year minimum funding plan, separating core coordination from programme/project costs, use annual impact data for fundraising.
School capacity constraints reduce uptake.	Offer simple booking, in-school delivery, curriculum links, ready-made offer and flexible dates.
Mentor recruitment is uneven.	Form The Future leads structured employer/mentor recruitment, Creative Mentor Network provides high-quality training and retention support.
Young people face transport, confidence or cost barriers.	Maintain travel subsidy, taster sessions, peer cohorts, access budgets and trusted adult routes alongside hybrid delivery models.
Programme becomes activity-rich but progression-poor.	Use the progression register, individual next-step planning and annual tracking across all strands.
Creative Launchpad support benefits already-connected artists.	Use transparent eligibility, targeted outreach, access costs, paid opportunities and demographic monitoring.

The investment case is straightforward: Creative Futures offers a joined-up response to a fragmented problem. It supports schools where capacity is constrained, supports young people where networks are unequal, and supports the creative economy where workforce diversity and early-career sustainability are fragile.

The recommended priority for 2026/27 is to secure the January 2027 launch of Creative Connections, retain the free schools offer and travel support for Creative Pathways, and design the first Creative Launchpad pilot so that all three umbrella strands are operational by the end of 2028.

10. Source list

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