

# Workforce challenges, diversity and cultural leadership

Exploring the challenges and  
opportunities for Manchester's  
cultural sector

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# Executive summary

This research project builds on 15 years of academic and policy research which has identified inequalities in creative work. This existing body of research highlights how the cultural workforce is yet to reflect the diversity of the wider population, and how minoritised workers are often systemically excluded from getting into and getting on in creative work (Wreyford et al, 2024; Brook et al, 2018; Brook et al 2020).

This qualitative study contributes to these debates by offering local-level insights into workforce challenges in Manchester, one of Greater Manchester’s ten boroughs. As part of a partnership between Manchester City Council and Creative Manchester, and the launch of the Council’s new cultural strategy, the research investigates key workforce challenges around diversity, recruitment, retention, talent development and skills. Taking a specific focus on how these issues play out at leadership level, this study undertook a deep dive into

the issues on the ground – hearing from people in the sector about how they understand the problems (and opportunities), and what they feel needs to change.

The study’s key findings reveal that despite the widespread uptake of EDI initiatives and workforce development interventions, there are still stark inequalities around diversity and leadership in Manchester. The issues range from challenges diversifying the leadership cohort; to problems attracting, recruiting, developing and retaining emerging leaders from diverse backgrounds;

to widespread experiences of isolation in leadership; to broader structural constraints which continue to reproduce inequalities. These findings are not specific to Manchester per se, but they are reflective of many other recent and national studies on workforce challenges and diversity (Clore, 2024; Aston et al, 2024; Holt-White et al, 2024).

However, the 25 interview conversations reveal that there are Manchester-specific opportunities here, namely, the close-knit ties between organisations and the desire for deeper cross-institutional collaboration around EDI.

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This study makes use of these Manchester-specific opportunities within five core recommendations which aim to support diversity in the sector:

- 1. Encourage a new network of cultural leaders** – this network should include and support the development of minoritised emerging leaders in Manchester

**2. Create a formalised Manchester mentorship scheme** – to take a focus on including leaders from diverse backgrounds
- 3. Facilitate joined up coaching provision across cultural organisations** – to take a focus on supporting leaders from diverse backgrounds

**4. Mid to high-level training schemes/placements for emerging leaders** – supported by Manchester higher education providers and skills development providers in the city such as Factory Academy

**5. Develop a joined-up EDI model** – creating frameworks for sharing best practice around EDI across cultural institutions in the city

# Introduction

**Over the last 15 years, academic and policy research has played a key role in highlighting inequalities in creative work.**

This body of research shows how the cultural workforce is yet to reflect the diversity of the wider population, and how minoritised workers are often systemically excluded from *getting into* and *getting on* in creative work (Wreyford et al, 2021; Brook et al, 2018; Brook et al 2020). This body of research points to a number of social, cultural and structural barriers as the root cause of inequity within the sector. These barriers continue to reproduce demographic inequalities across race and ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and sexuality.

This research tells us how the very things that give the creative and cultural industries their vitality – their speed, innovation, and turnover of people, organisations and ideas, also exclude people from non-traditional backgrounds (ACE, 2017). Whether due to the normalisation of precarious, short term, and portfolio working patterns (Jones, 1996; Gill, 2014; O'Brien et al, 2018; Brook et al, 2020),

‘who you know’, informal hiring practices and progression routes (Conor, Gill, Taylor, 2015), or the dominance of middle-class somatic norms in the sector (Brook et al, 2020), minoritised groups are disadvantaged on different levels.

We know that, on average, men are paid 28% more than women in the cultural sector (Ashton et al, 2024). We also know that, in 2023, 90% of the overall cultural workforce were white (McAndrew et al, 2024)<sup>1</sup>. Research has also revealed how disabled people make up just 20% of the workforce, and how the normalisation of jumping between jobs in non-standard work contracts means these workers are less likely to have their adjustment needs met (Randle & Hardey, 2016: 451). Widespread underfunding poses a further challenge for cultural institutions to provide sufficient support for Access to Work packages for disabled people. There are further exclusions in the fact that over half the creative workforce hold at least one degree

(58%), compared to 31.8% of all other occupations (DMCS, 2015 in de Bernard, 2023).

Equally, the sector’s long hours, heavy workloads and difficult work-life balance create barriers for those with caring responsibilities (Dent et al, 2019). Recent research has also shown how the Covid-19 pandemic intensified these issues (Raising Films, 2021; Gilmore et al, 2024), with many workers struggling to juggle new and increased demands on workloads, alongside caring responsibilities, for instance. Other studies highlight the ways ethnically diverse workers were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, with many suffering the effects of reduced financial stability and job security, as well as increased obstacles to entry, progression, and retention (Ali et al, 2022). Exclusions within the sector are also intersectional, with class, race, gender, and mobility often coming together to frame the overall career paths of cultural workers (Dent, 2020).

These issues are only exacerbated when it comes to leadership level. A major study commissioned by Clore Leadership last year showed how demands on leaders have complexified in the last five years, with many leaders feeling under-supported, burnt out, and unequipped to deal with the new pressures facing their organisations (Clore, 2024). This study also found that Global Majority, D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people are facing significant challenges, with many leaving the sector altogether (Ibid). Coupled with this, research shows how discrimination is particularly pronounced in the recruitment of wider leadership positions – with ethnic minorities facing a significant disadvantage (Adamovic, 2023). Patterns of ‘hiring as cultural matching’ (Rivera, 2011; Koppman, 2016) often explains the monoculture found in many leadership teams in the sector (Wreyford et al, 2021; Brook et al, 2021). We also see these issues reflected within the ‘glass ceiling’ analogy, whereby marginalised groups are perpetually overrepresented in more junior-level roles. This is a systemic issue for disabled cultural workers, which creates a shortage of people with impairments in management positions who

could otherwise act as role models for disabled workers coming through (Randle & Hardey, 2016: 452).

## The Manchester study’s focus

This qualitative study builds on the existing body of research to offer local-level insights in Manchester. It highlights the key challenges around workforce diversity, taking a specific focus on how these issues play out at leadership level. Place-based leadership is a relatively less-explored area of qualitative research on workforce diversity, despite the widespread (and national) recognition of the lack of diversity in senior positions (ACE, 2017; Brook et al, 2021). Equally, there is an acknowledgement that the majority of diversity initiatives have focussed on entry-level interventions, both in Manchester, and nationally (Creative Access, 2023). This project provides overdue insights into the challenges around diversity across Manchester’s leadership cohort, hearing from people in the sector about how they understand the issues, and what they feel needs to change.

These in-depth conversations with Manchester’s senior leaders, emerging leaders,

and employment-support cohort indicate that this is a sector which is acutely aware of the workforce challenges around diversity and inequality. This is a sector which not only acknowledges the problem, but they are also pushing forward numerous initiatives, policies, and workstreams in their endeavours to cultivate workplaces where minoritised groups can thrive. Yet, these conversations also indicate how the sector is faced by innumerable structural and cultural barriers. These barriers not only impede the sector’s capacity to facilitate progress, but often their energy to keep advancing with important interventions for change. From the aftermath of the pandemic and the loss of staff and revenue, to the decades of austerity measures and reduced public subsidies, to retention issues and cultures of overworking and burn-out, to new challenges around protecting the core functions of organisations in the midst of political polarisation, the issues are unbounded. This broader moment of sector crisis has profound consequences for workforce challenges and diversity within Manchester’s cultural sector, as explored throughout this report.

<sup>1</sup> Though it’s worth noting that ethnic representation is fractionally higher in Manchester’s cultural sector, with the most recent Manchester City Council Cultural Impact Survey indicating that 16% of the workforce were from Global Majority backgrounds (2023–2024)

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# The research context/problem

This study comes at a pivotal moment for Manchester's cultural sector, with The City Council recently launching a new cultural strategy for the city: *Always Everywhere, Manchester's Cultural Ambition* (2024-2034). The ambitious plans have been co-designed by Manchester City Council, along with thousands of residents, educators, artists and cultural organisations. At the heart of this strategy lies a renewed focus on equality, diversity and inclusion – ensuring cultural opportunities and activities are accessible to all, and this includes thinking about audiences, artists, the workforce and leadership.

As part of the strategy's 'People Shape Culture' strand, cultural partners have identified diversity as a key priority of their workforce development plan for the city. This workforce development plan aims to support new talent coming into the workforce, whilst promoting a wider awareness of the kinds of jobs available in the cultural sector. Within the background research for *Always Everywhere*, the strategy has clearly highlighted the successful

interventions which are already happening across the city. The engagement work at Factory Academy (which has placed hundreds of young people in creative jobs) and the talent development work of Brighter Sound offer just two examples of important workforce diversity and development initiatives. However, much of this existing development work has been targeted at entry-level positions and pathways. This gap, and the subsequent lack of attention to diversity issues

at leadership level, sparks the rationale for this specific study and partnership between Manchester City Council and Creative Manchester.

To offer a greater understanding of the challenges at leadership level, this study undertakes a deep dive into the key issues on the ground – hearing from the sector about how they understand the problems (and opportunities), and what they feel needs to change.

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## Methodology

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**There were three key questions driving the research, which were co-produced between the Researcher and Manchester City Council:**

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**1.** Where is the sector currently positioned in terms of diversity within its cultural leadership cohort?

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**2.** What are the key recruitment and workforce challenges around diversity, talent development, skills, retention, and career progression?

.....

**3.** How does the sector envisage these issues improving? What support does the sector need to enact this change?

.....

## Research sample

The research sample included a range of case study institutions from across Manchester's cultural sector, mainly concentrated on the areas of music, visual arts, heritage, literature, theatre and performance. These organisations include 1) small and medium-sized non-profit organisations, 2) major National Portfolio Organisations, and 3) commercially funded larger institutions. This diverse set of case studies aimed to offer a representative oversight of the key types of organisations (and employers) across the sector.

The key sample organisations included in the study were:

- The Whitworth
- Factory International
- Brighter Sound
- Royal Exchange Theatre
- The National Football Museum
- HOME
- Science and Industry Museum
- Venture Arts
- Castlefield Gallery
- Company Chameleon
- Z-arts
- Co-op Live
- Contact Theatre
- Manchester City of Literature
- The Lowry

## Methodological approach

The mixed-methods research was conducted across three key stages:

1. **Quantitative review of the existing data** on workforce diversity in Manchester's cultural sector. This included analysing the 2023-2024 Arts Council England National Portfolio submissions, and the results of the Manchester City Council 2023-2024 Cultural Impact Survey.
2. **25 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from sample organisations** – including senior leaders, emerging leaders, and those working in employment support roles such as HR or EDI/inclusion. This interview sample included participants with different lived experience of the protected characteristics of the 2010 Equality Act, as well as class.
3. **Two stakeholder roundtables** – with 20 Manchester leaders from different backgrounds. These roundtables functioned as research feedback sessions, to consolidate the key recruitment and workforce challenges based on the research's findings and 5 key recommendations.

## Anonymity and ethics

The majority of interviewees opted to participate in the study in an anonymous capacity. As such, all participants and quotes are discussed anonymously throughout the entire report and project outputs. The intention of this research is not to highlight or connect workforce challenges to individual organisations, but to reflect these as challenges which are broadly shared at the local and national level.

# Key findings

**The study's key findings reveal that despite the widespread uptake of EDI initiatives and interventions within the sample institutions, there are still evident inequalities around diversity and leadership in Manchester.**

Overall, six core themes came out of the interviews:

1. **Representational challenges**
2. **Recruitment challenges**
3. **Retention and progression challenges**
4. **Skills gaps**
5. **The challenge of polarised political environments**
6. **Broader cultural and structural barriers**



## 1. Representational challenges<sup>2</sup>:

*"It seems to me, the higher up the ladder you go in the arts and culture, it's a white, middle class preserve."*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

*"The middle to upper classes, and higher socioeconomic background with the arts, has historically been higher in representation. Lots of reasons... but the low salaries are definitely part of that. And you can map that right through from entry level right to leadership. It doesn't really make any difference at what level you're talking about. It's just a systemic issue, and has been for a long, long time....."*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

Overall, all 25 participants recognised that there were representational challenges at leadership level. These challenges are shaped by a decline in diversity the higher up the workforce you go – with representational issues being particularly stark in executive teams. In most organisations, greater diversity was present within the more junior and front of house roles, which coincidentally tended to be the lowest paid and precarious

members of staff. Interviewees also acknowledged greater diversity within the freelance cohort, a pattern which is also reflected within the Arts Council England 2023–2024 NPO submissions.

Representational challenges were more acute within specific areas and teams. For example, participants reported problems attracting and recruiting candidates from diverse backgrounds in production teams, or technical roles such as lighting – since these areas tended to be overrepresented by white men.

Broadly, the gender balance between cisgender men and women in leadership was equal (if not overrepresented by women). However, gender diversity across non-binary, trans or intersex groups was noted to be much lower. This challenge is further complexified by recent research revealing a national drop in the number of NPO staff reporting as 'a gender different to the sex registered at birth' (Sharratt and Puffet, 2025). The underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities was another core challenge in all organisations, with concerns indicating that underrepresentation has worsened since the pandemic and the downsizing of

some workforces – an issue highlighted by other major national studies (Ali et al, 2022; Creative Access, 2023).

Representation across disability was another major challenge, despite the numerous interventions and measures put in place to increase representation in these areas. It is worth acknowledging how neurodiversity and long-term health/mental health conditions were recognised as better represented in many areas of the workforce, but not specifically leadership. A further consideration lies in the employee self-disclosure process and the inherent stigma which continues to be attached to neurodiversity, chronic health conditions, and to disability, especially in terms of ability and performance (Randle & Hardey, 2016: 452). This stigma may indeed impact the ways employees choose to disclose these differences or not.

Many organisations described how class had been a central priority in terms of EDI strategy and recruitment, particularly for organisations located in areas with higher working-class representation. Although many organisations did report more representation in relation to class, this was not always reflected in executive teams or at Board level.

*"We definitely had an issue with representing people with disabilities, and I think it's something that you'll find in a lot of organisations, particularly outside of London, is that even when they do really great community engaged work and artistic development and representing a broad spectrum of people in their programme, when it comes to actually the core team operationally, then there's some kind of disjunct there."*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

<sup>2</sup> 'Representation' challenges refers to representation across the nine protected characteristics outlined by the 2010 Equality Act. It also refers to class – a social category which was discussed in equal measure throughout the interviews.

## 2. Recruitment challenges:

Recruitment challenges were shaped by a marked lack of open vacancies at managerial level. The lack of hiring capacity (particularly for smaller organisations) was highlighted as a key barrier in organisation's efforts to diversify middle management and leadership. This issue is also linked to the wider ongoing funding crisis in the contemporary cultural sector, with public arts spending reported to be the lowest it has been since 2010 (Aston, 2024).

The low sector pay was named as another barrier in attracting and recruiting candidates from low-income backgrounds. This issue goes hand in hand with the over-representation of middle-class applicants for many

positions, as participants flagged. The ability of middle-class or upper middle-class applicants to lean on financial support from family was identified as a notable advantage in navigating the low paid and precarious entry routes to industry. The perceived instability of the sector was also recognised as a further barrier for Global Majority and working-class applicants, whose families may instead encourage more secure and linear career pathways.

*"Sometimes it's around what careers are known to people's family, and what careers are valued within that cultural heritage. It's connected to socio-economic circumstances as well and where / how people feel able to pursue a 'risky' career. So I think there are barriers there, the fact that the music*

*industry and the cultural sector are predominantly white industries – people are not seeing themselves represented or reflected"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

Perceptions around the 'types' of jobs available in the industry was also a significant challenge. With the over-focus on creative and artistic pathways, many participants felt back-of-house departments such as marketing, communications, finance, or events management were less visible – and therefore less promoted to young people coming into the sector (as well as candidates from different industries or backgrounds). These non-creative roles traditionally might offer more security than creative roles, and as such, more education is needed to highlight these opportunities.

“One of the problems we have, as a small organisation, is that we very rarely recruit as people tend to stay here. So that makes making the team more diverse, more of a challenge.”  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

## 3. Retention and progression challenges:

*"People don't know what the jobs are. And we've been saying this for years, but people don't get the fact that, if you're an electrician...you could be a really valuable part of this industry as well. Yeah, it's a number of perceptive barriers that we need to break down. I think it's a number of entry points, helping and supporting people through those entry points and realising that they have employable skills with us."*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

On the other hand, there are examples of organisations improving workplace representation through Positive Action<sup>3</sup> approaches. In particular, using positive action within recruitment has helped some organisations to reduce the disadvantage experienced by groups with protected characteristics. Organisations also discussed the benefits of drawing on the expertise of Staff LGBTQI+ and anti-racist working groups, which in several instances had enabled hiring panels to increase the diversity of candidates and subsequent appointments.

*"I think it's even just going between jobs in the sector. It's very hard to move anywhere. I think you kind of get to middle management, and then you're like, stuck..."*  
(Anon. Leader, 2025)

Similarly to the recruitment challenges above, the lack of movement at senior level means there are patterns of emerging leaders moving across the workforce rather than up. This progression stagnation has, in some instances, contributed to people leaving the sector all together.

The other side to the workforce stagnation is that some leaders were being retained through organisational loyalty and experiencing a sense of enjoyment in the work. This was especially true for organisations which were centred around shared collective goals, in particular, goals relating to equality or social justice. Interviewees also suggested that the broader lack of open vacancies had contributed to leaders 'staying put' for longer periods of time.

In the instance where participants did identify a problem with retaining staff from diverse backgrounds, it was often linked to a lack of organisational capacity to offer enhanced support. Interviewees discussed a distinct lack of time and resource to implement 'wrap around' support mechanisms for roles where candidates may need additional support or development.

*"In an ideal world, you'd have more staff so that some people who were developing could do that safely. And you know, in a great space for them to do it. We just haven't got the money, you know, it's unfortunate, so there's that tension"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

Alongside the limited support, some leaders from diverse backgrounds reported feelings of isolation and a lacking sense of community at senior level. Loneliness in leadership was discussed by an overwhelming majority of interviewees. But this issue is intensified for leaders who are already minoritised in the organisation. In particular, ethnically diverse participants discussed feelings of being 'out of place' and alienated through working in predominantly white spaces.

<sup>3</sup> Positive Action is defined as actions an organisation could take to address the imbalance of opportunity that an individual with one or more protected characteristics may face (for example, race, sex, or sexual orientation). These actions might include targeted recruitment or progression schemes which aim to level the playing field for underrepresented groups. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/positive-action-in-the-workplace-guidance-for-employers/positive-action-in-the-workplace>

This is a critical issue outlined by other major studies (Puwar, 2004; Ali & Byrne, 2022) and has a ripple effect on retention and progression challenges (Ali, 2023).

The loss of staff during the pandemic, and the wider financial crisis facing the sector, were also key contributors to retention challenges. Research has shown how the wider 'pause for thought' generated by the pandemic lockdowns

prompted many cultural workers to reflect on their working conditions and future in the sector (Dent et al; O'Brien et al, 2024). In this moment, some leaders moved to other industries in the pursuit of better pay, and better work-life-balance. Clore Leadership's major study 'Reimagine it Different' indicated that this shift was the lead cause of dozens of arts leaders' choice to leave, regardless of background.

*"I am noticing a lot of change happening in the leadership of a lot of places, yeah, I think there was a good exodus after COVID, and a lot of people were questioning what they were doing. Generally, in this sector, people are not in it for the pay, and I think for what we do, there's probably a lot easier ways to earn"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

*“Like the last two or three times I’ve hired a manager, I’ve had to go with someone that I feel can just run, because I’m completely overloaded. There’s absolutely no way I can bring someone in and coach them up to level, which is what you would ideally do, which would probably help with representation.”*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

#### 4. Skills gaps:

Fundraising was a crucial skills gap identified by interviewees. This gap ranged from challenges around filling fundraising or development posts, to increased pressures for organisations to develop innovative fundraising skills (in the wake of funding cuts and rising costs). Shortages of technical skills was identified as another significant gap, with participants noticing a shift in technicians choosing to work in more lucrative industries and organisations.

*"I think there's just that sense of it becoming harder to get the expertise we need... a lot of those technical roles have become freelance, and people are working across TV and theatre, and so it is becoming more challenging to get the expertise you need, because it's all become outsourced, and you're competing, you're in a very competitive market, often where you're not the highest paying gig"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

In the face of rising inflation costs and decreasing public subsidies, participants reported growing organisational pressures to be commercially sustainable, as well as profitable. This pressure is increasingly falling

on the leadership cohort, who often feel underequipped to meet the levels of business accrument and succession planning required within this current landscape. There are also tensions around the need to grow strategic partnerships to strengthen organisations' sustainability – yet organisations are often lacking the resource to implement this kind of strategic planning.

Resilience and entrepreneurialism were highlighted as increasingly crucial skills to adjust to the evolving workforce dynamics – in the aftermath of multiple crisis such as the pandemic, funding cuts and broader political uncertainty. New technologies pose a further challenge, with some organisations struggling to keep up with developments around digitalisation and AI, particularly at the pace of other sectors, such as advertising and film.

There are gaps in some organisation's confidence in general managerial skills, such as pastoral care, motivating others, negotiating difficult conversations, and conflict management. Patterns of premature promotions in smaller or under-resourced organisations was noted as a leading contributor to some of these managerial skills gaps.

*"Anything that is about managing staff and how to manage staff in a way that supports their development, as well as just having really good line management skills. Because I don't think we try, as people do progress, I don't think we train them, and I don't think we, you know, we have quite a lot of first-time line managers who've never had any training"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

Another challenge was the need for more support around cultural awareness. Many organisations reported an increased desire to equip staff with deeper knowledge and inclusive language for their engagement work with diverse communities, particularly as these organisations have diversified their programmes, content and outreach.<sup>4</sup> There are also gaps in organisations' preparedness to handle sensitive issues or public responses to contentious programming or exhibitions – an issue which is particularly acute given the current moment of polarised political debates, as explored in the following section.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that training around cultural awareness is already happening in many of the study's sample organisations, though some organisations feel more equipped to prepare staff than others – and this was often determined by disparities in resource allocation for training and development.



## 5. 'Brave spaces' and responding to polarised public debates:

A theme which transpired to be so significant (even though it was not included in the original research questions) was the challenge organisations were facing around responding to polarised political debates. This issue is indeed something the Always Everywhere cultural strategy has picked up on within its 'Brave spaces' priority strand – which aims to further support organisations in managing these issues.

Almost all organisations described increased pressures to respond to issues relating to political polarisation and reactionary politics. Often spurred on by the so-called 'culture wars' taking place on social media, leaders reported challenges managing and protecting the core functions of organisations when political discourse seeps into the organisation's operations.

*"We are not skilled at dealing with those issues that society is wrestling with and then manifesting in our organisations in ways that are absolutely catastrophic. So that could be anything from, obviously, the conversations around diversity, the culture wars, the gender transgender debate, the wars that*

*are going on in terms of Israel and Gaza, what's happening in America, what's happening here in the UK, you know. So all of those conversations are taking place in our organisations in a way that are effectively hijacking the organisation's capacity"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

Participants also acknowledged the need for more training around the ethics of supporting staff who have been impacted by wider global events. For example, the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the anti-immigration riots of 2024, or the wars in Gaza. With increased demands on workloads in multiple areas, leaders reported feeling underprepared to effectively manage this kind of tailored support for affected colleagues. There were also concerns around supporting front-of-house staff who regularly engage with the public, particularly in the invigilation of political or contentious exhibitions or shows. Moreover, it is troubling that the staff who frequently handle complex and sensitive conversations with the public are those on minimum wage or on precarious contracts.

The wider impact of austerity and the loss of many public services was an additional complexity, which brings into question the role of public cultural institutions within this particular moment.

Further investment around supporting staff and their public engagement work was acknowledged as a core and urgent priority for many organisations.

*"We're working in public spaces, and in public spaces where the public is becoming increasingly unpredictable, or kind of like, needs more support than it's ever possibly maybe not that it's ever needed, but it's clear that it needs the support there. There are other services that have been lost. So there's more that the sector could do"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

This wider environment of heightened politicisation has created a climate of cautiousness and risk aversion amongst many organisations, particularly those who have experienced reputational damage from responding to contentious issues. Interviewees noted that political cautiousness was increasingly becoming the dominant approach of larger institutions.

There are growing concerns for how these environments are impacting minoritised staff in organisations. In particular, individuals who may find that their lived experience positions them as the 'expert' on issues connected to anti-racism,

gender equality, ableism, and wider social justice issues. Leaders feared that this heightened sense of responsibility was creating additional layers of emotional labour, burden or stress for these colleagues.

*"That's where these things often fail, because I think it puts too much pressure on the individual to enact the changes that have been made... Because I do think there's often a lot of emotional labour that's invisible with those colleagues, and you really have to proactively watch that"*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

## 6. Broader cultural and structural barriers:

One crucial issue that has come out of the stakeholder interviews is the need to acknowledge wider cultural and structural barriers in the arts. These barriers are not necessarily specific to Manchester, or the cultural organisations involved in this research. These are systemic and reproduced at the national and international level (Brook et al, 2020). Structural underfunding of the arts is one crucial example, which leads to cultures and practices which limit the potential to create more open and inclusive workplaces.

For example, widespread practices of hiring staff who 'fit in' creates a culture of risk aversion within recruitment practices – which reproduces the dominant white and middle-class somatic norms of the sector (Brook et al, 2020). It is equally important to acknowledge that many of these barriers are connected to wider histories of colonialism, patriarchy, and class inequality in the U.K, and the ongoing work to address this.

*"I think there's a lot of focus on people who will fit in, and not a focus on people who will challenge and excite the organisation...And I think that is a bit of a problem in recruitment, generally, in the arts, is that we recruit to what we've had previously, we want someone to slot it in..."*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

*"So the very premise of diversity, which is that you can work in different ways, is really hard to sustain within the arts because a lack of resource and overstretch of the workforce basically means there's only one way of working and surviving, and that's to work a lot of hours, to have the kind of physical and psychological resilience that allows you to do that, and it's difficult when a lot of fatigue, you know, it's difficult to make space and capacity for people to work differently."*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

Expectations around workforce productivity create further obstacles. Interviewees repeatedly told of the need for candidates to ‘hit the ground running’ and be producing work immediately upon commencing a role. They identified the lack of resource and capacity to adequately develop new starters as the lead cause perpetuating this culture. This pattern sets a standard of hyper-productivity within the workforce, which is not always achievable for all workers.

*“The consistent barrier for us really has been you need someone to come in and hit the ground running and to have that experience, even for the more junior roles. What hiring managers are looking for is, ‘I just need someone to come in, and I need to know they’re already capable’”*  
(Anon. HR Manager, 2025)

Informal cultures around mentorship create unequal opportunities in the sector. Several leaders described benefitting from mentorship early on in their careers. These opportunities were often initiated by their seniors ‘spotting their talent’ and investing in and developing their careers. Research shows how the focus on talent and informal rewards tends to hide structural inequalities within cultural work (Brook et al, 2021). In this way, the good intentions of senior mentors may indirectly be driven by unconscious bias—an issue which can lead to

the continued dominance of already powerful social groups (Saha, 2018 in Brook et al, 2021). It’s worth noting how the current moment of leadership exhaustion may result in a scaled-back mentorship offering – which could lead to unequal levels of access to development opportunities.

There are also issues around the kinds of psychological qualities expected of leaders within the current moment – namely, the increased pressure to be entrepreneurial, resilient, self-driven and confident. These qualities are more easily attained by some than others. Moreover, the cultural expectation for leaders to be always on, always advocating for oneself, and confident enough to ask for development, coaching, promotions, or pay increases, for example, feeds into exclusions of opportunity.

*“I also think that one of the reasons that there’s less diversity in senior leadership is that feeling of imposter syndrome and not feeling like you should even you’re even qualified to go for the role in the first place... And I think that tends to happen a lot, but especially for brown and Black kids. Even when they’re growing up, they’re told that they need to do more work to reach the same level as their counterparts and their peers. Then I think that ends up translating into the workplace sometimes”*  
(Anon. Leader, 2025)

*“It’s the stuff that’s perception based. So you’ve got people who do have the skills, but they don’t have access to that level of permission or confidence”*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

Confidence gaps and individualised working cultures means minoritised emerging leaders may fall through the net in terms of development opportunities. Access to coaching offers a crucial example of this disparity. Whilst most participants discussed limited access to coaching, those who had benefitted from coaching explained having to independently advocate and push for this support. Some leaders even described paying for coaching through personal finances – which marks an obvious inequality in terms of accessing development opportunities.

Interviewees also discussed how the long hours and cultures of working beyond capacity continues to disadvantage leaders with caring responsibilities, as well as neurodivergent individuals and people with mental health difficulties. The notable increase in mental health challenges since the pandemic was highlighted as another significant challenge for the workforce.

*“Because of the pressure we all work under, and there’s a way of working, and I think this is probably true of many arts organisations, which requires you to be very fast thinking, very fast at grappling with new information, immediately productive upon entry to your role, to maintain a high level of productivity, even if your own physical or mental health doesn’t quite allow for that.”*  
(Anon. Senior Leader, 2025)

# Research implications and recommendations

This is a difficult context, as highlighted by existing research and the insights across this report.

However, despite the ongoing structural challenges facing the sector, something needs to be done.

This report puts forward five key recommendations which offer a route to broadscale positive change in Manchester's cultural industry.

The recommendations take a specific focus on supporting existing leaders from diverse backgrounds, as well as encouraging diversity within

the future leadership cohort. All recommendations have been developed with the view of representing participants' perspectives and what they feel needs to change.

1

## Encourage a new support network of cultural leaders

Isolation and experiences of loneliness in leadership were consistent themes throughout all the leadership interviewees. A newly planned network of cultural leaders could strengthen peer-support across the sector, operating alongside the Manchester Cultural Consortium to facilitate knowledge sharing, capacity building and collective problem solving. With the aim of supporting diversity in the sector, the group should take a focus on including and developing minoritised leaders and organisations. The network should set clear contributions and commitments for members, for example, promising several hours per year to mentorship, coaching, EDI sharing etc.

2

## Create a formalised Manchester mentorship scheme

It is evident that the informality of existing mentorship opportunities (both in Manchester and nationally) runs a risk of excluding individuals in less privileged and well-networked positions. The establishment of a formalised Manchester mentorship scheme offers the opportunity to create a fairer, more transparent ecosystem of emerging leadership support within the city. Such a scheme could be facilitated by collaborative efforts between the new network of cultural leaders, the Always Everywhere Arts HR Working Group, and the Oxford Road Corridor culture network.

3

## Facilitate joined-up coaching provision across cultural organisations

All organisations acknowledged the benefits of leadership coaching, yet there are currently limited and unequal levels of access to such support. Manchester-wide coaching provision could be facilitated as part of the commitments of the new cultural leader's network and The Manchester Cultural Consortium – sharing skills, expertise, and building networks for emerging leaders. This coaching should take a focus on supporting leaders from diverse backgrounds.

4

## Mid-high level training schemes/placements for emerging leaders

There is a clear gap in terms of employment support at middle-management and leadership level in Manchester, with existing workforce development focussing on entry and junior levels. Factory Academy could lead on establishing a high-level training scheme for emerging leaders, supported by The Always Everywhere Delivery Partnership and Arts HR Working Group. This work should also be supported by higher education institutions such as the University of Manchester's Alliance Business School, or Manchester Metropolitan University's Business School. Training should take a focus on supporting leaders from diverse backgrounds, understanding their specific development needs, and developing bespoke and tailored programmes of support.

5

## Develop a joined-up EDI model

There are many examples of best practice EDI policies within the cultural organisations in Manchester, but these are not always being shared or collaborated on sector wide. This workstream could be taken on by the Always Everywhere Delivery Partnership's Workstream Leads for EDI and Workforce Development. Within this, Workstream Leads could encourage participating organisations to develop a framework to home in on and share expertise in specific areas of EDI and workforce support. Some responsibilities might be 1) sharing of best practice procedures such as Positive Action frameworks or including anti-racist, LGBTQI+, or disabled working groups in recruitment processes, and 2) establishing more transparency around in-house EDI reporting/enabling these datasets to be made publicly available upon request.

It is recommended that a **reporting framework** is developed by the *Always Everywhere* Delivery Partnership to annually review the take up of these five recommendations.



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