The Children Have Spoken

Young People's Views on Arts and Culture in Havering, September 2026

By Francesca Bailey and the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch team, on behalf of the FUSE network.

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With special thanks to Ardleigh Green Junior School, Bower Park Academy, KORU Alternative Provision Academy, MyPlace, NCC College Ardleigh Green, Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School, Scotts Primary School, St Edward's Church of England Academy and The Ionians.

For the Young People: What You Told Us

We asked children and young people in Havering what they think about arts and culture. Here's what we found.

- You like it. 87% of the young people who filled in our survey said they enjoy arts and culture.
- You want more. 78% said they'd like to visit more places like theatres, galleries and museums.
- It's about friends. 78% said it's a chance to spend time with friends or meet new people.
- It helps you feel good. 62% said it's good for their health or wellbeing.

What gets in the way?

- Money (58%)
- Getting there, because places are too far away or hard to reach (47%)
- Not having enough time (47%)
- Not wanting to go on your own (46%)
- Feeling nervous, worried or judged

What we'll do with this: FUSE is a group of schools, arts groups and community organisations in Havering. We'll use what you've said to push for affordable events that are closer to home or school, as well as ways to take part with friends or other young people. Thank you to everyone who shared their ideas.

Introduction

In 2023, Queen's Theatre Hornchurch visited schools across Havering to gather young people's views on arts and culture. The findings were presented at *The Children Have Spoken* conference and highlighted several barriers to creative activity. 55% of children and young people (CYP) named social anxiety as the biggest barrier. Other frequently cited barriers were finance, time, discrimination, confidence and fear of judgement. CYP also suggested solutions, including free events, avoiding clashes with religious holidays, and taking satellite events across Havering.

The consultation also highlighted differences in how young people viewed arts and culture. Children held firm views on who the arts are for. Theatre-goers were seen as outgoing and wealthy, readers as introverted and intelligent, and museum-goers as old and "boring". We acknowledge that arts engagement has a cost, which may shape the view that theatre-goers are wealthy. But, given one of our QTH youth theatre members smuggled Dippy the diplodocus from the Natural History Museum onto our stage for a bow, museum attendees are certainly not all old and boring!

There was also clear appetite for greater engagement. The work brought schools and youth-facing arts organisations together to form a Local Cultural Education Partnership (LCEP). Young people named it "FUSE". FUSE has since met regularly to share ideas and support projects that increase opportunities for CYP to engage with arts and culture.

Three years on, we want to ensure our work remains relevant to those it aims to serve. We have therefore repeated the consultation with some changes. As before, we visited schools to run workshops exploring arts and culture, but this time we included groups outside of typical school settings. Arts Council England (ACE) is due to publish its Creative Young Lives Survey, which assesses youth engagement with arts and cultural activities. We therefore used some of the same parameters in our own survey, allowing for comparison with national findings once ACE's report is released.

This report gives a snapshot of the views of the young people we spoke to in June-August 2026. It is not formal academic research. It reports what we heard, and it should be read alongside the limitations described on page 24.

Who We Spoke To

We chose groups from a range of Havering neighbourhoods, including Liberty, Marshalls, Crest and Havering North. Groups were chosen by invitation, not at random.

In total, we consulted 191 CYP.

Arts Groups

Three groups were directly involved in extra-curricular or full-time creative activities. We will call these “arts groups”.

32 Music and Performing Arts students from NCC College Ardleigh Green. They study performance-based courses full time and have regular access to external creative events through partners such as Queen's Theatre Hornchurch.

18 choir members from Ardleigh Green Junior School.

22 attendees at an Ionians gig, hosted at MyPlace.

Non-Specific Groups

These groups were not arts-based, though members may take part in arts activity elsewhere:

23 Year 10 students from Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School

29 Key Stage 3 students from Bower Park Academy

35 Year 5 pupils from Scotts Primary School

8 students aged 11–16 from KORU Alternative Provision Academy

19 secondary students from various year groups at St Edward's CofE Academy

5 care-experienced young people from a MyPlace youth group

Youth Perceptions of Arts and Culture

“Art is a form of entertainment and expression. A thought for those who struggle to think and a voice for those who cannot speak.”

– College Student

We gave participants a Post-It note to record their thoughts on what "culture" means to them. 180 Post-its were sorted into themes. Where a response contained more than one idea, it was counted in more than one theme, so totals will exceed 100%.

51% of responses referenced inclusion, community and belonging:

Culture is...

“Showing different things to different people and building trust within the community”

“Everyone gets included in the community”

“My country”

“Taking pride in a collective of elements that make up who you are and where you're from”

26% of responses referenced traditions and history:

Culture is...

“The traditions passed down from your family’s generations”

“Your roots”

“Culture is what you grew up with. Your family. Your friends. Your life. You”

Self-identity or self-expression was referenced by 25% of young people:

Culture is...

"Being who you would like to be"

"Belief in identity, a feeling/understanding you associate yourself with"

"Express yourself"

"DNA"

"Crappy society rebelled through self-expression"

"Something you spend a lot of time in, with some sort of personal connection"

Other themes included food, religion, values, learning and way of life. These are similar to 2023, when tradition, family, background and difference were the most common themes.

We repeated the activity for the word "art" and received 178 Post-its. The most common theme was performing arts (36%). This is unsurprising given that our arts groups were music and performance based.

27% of responses referenced creativity, imagination or expression of ideas:

Art is...

"The creation of something"

"Being creative where nothing is right or wrong and you can express your feelings and use your imagination"

23% of responses related to self-expression:

Art is...

"Expressing yourself in ways YOU want and not others"

"Feeling comfortable to express your ideas using creativity"

"Expression. Showing how you feel or how one feels through action, design, show and tell. It soothes you but also helps relieve bad emotion."

Notably, given that issues surrounding mental health featured strongly in the 2023 evaluation, a further 12% of responses to the above exercise referred specifically to emotion or "emotional outlet". This fits with findings discussed later in this report, relating to wellbeing.

Current Youth Arts Engagement

Figure 1 shows the results of a sticker chart exercise completed by all groups, providing an approximate picture of creative engagement. Stickers were counted by hand and the percentages rounded up. Categories match those in ACE's Creative Young Lives Survey. *Creative play* is defined as "make-believe" activities.

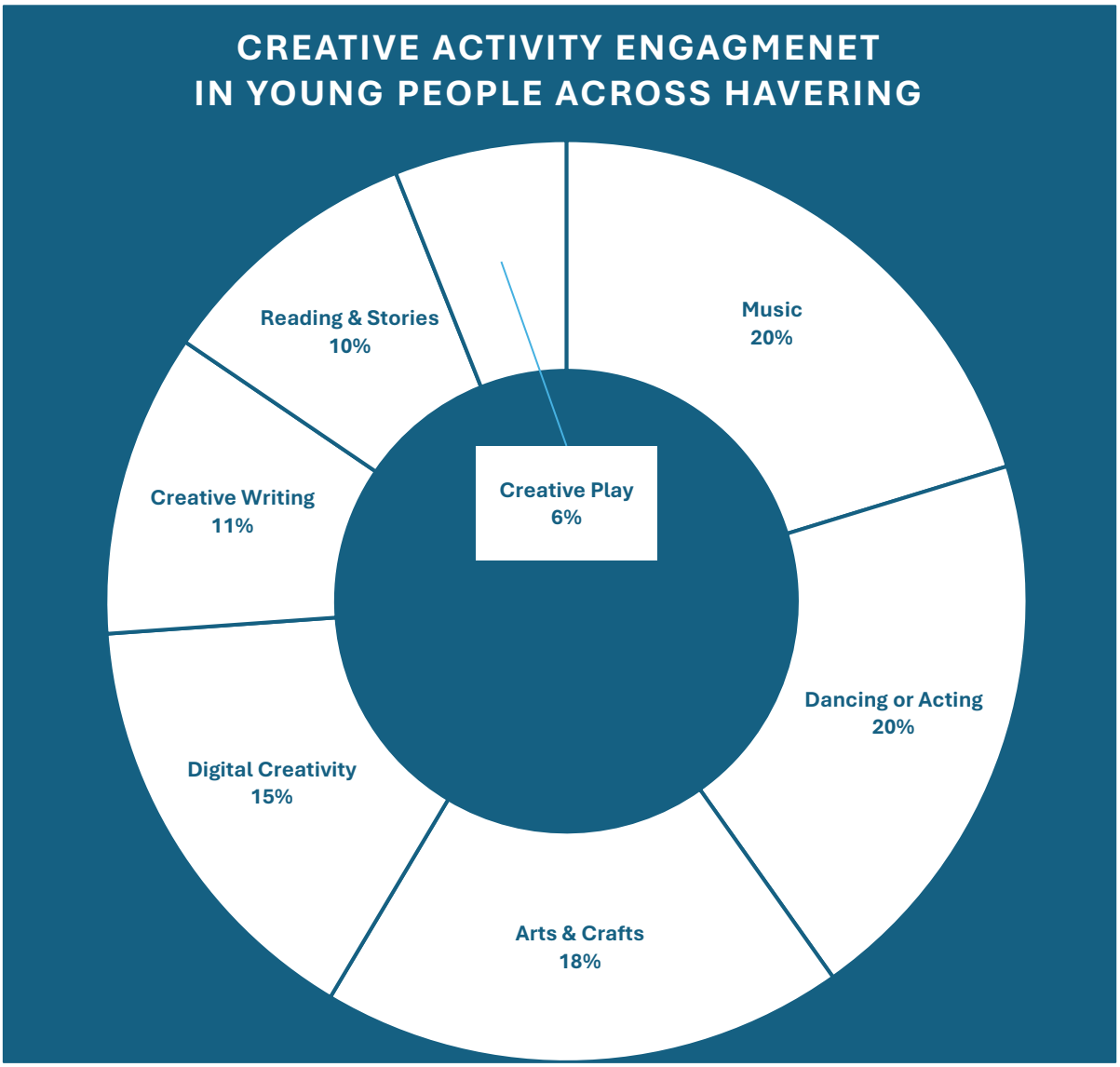


Figure 1.

Performing arts (music, dancing or acting) were the most common activities. This remained the case when the three arts groups were removed: Music (20%), Dancing or Acting (20%), Arts and Crafts (18%), Digital Creativity (14%), Creative Writing (12%), Reading and Stories (10%) and Creative Play (6%).

Young people also placed stickers on venues they had visited in the last year, again using ACE's Creative Young Lives categories. Figure 2 shows all CYP. When the arts groups were removed, results changed only slightly with music venue visits falling from 11% to 7%, an unsurprising result given the inclusion of gig attendees in the overall sample.

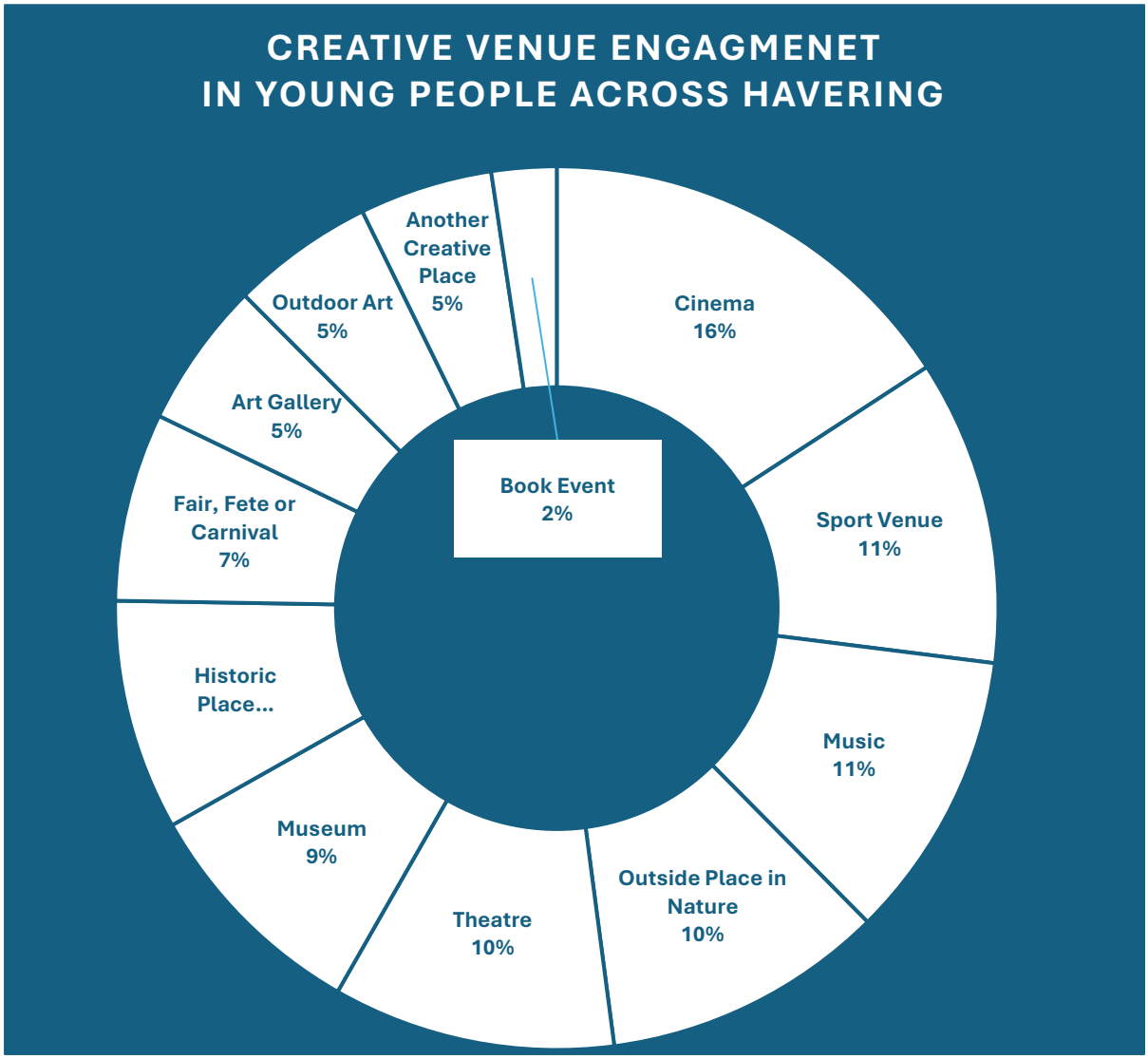


Figure 2.

Is There Appetite for More?

Yes! 138 young people aged 11–18 were asked: "Would you like to visit more places such as the theatre, art galleries, museums and other arts events? (Tick one)." 78% said "yes", 4% said "no", 16% said "maybe" and the remaining participants left their answer blank.

Benefits and Barriers to Engagement

138 young people aged 11–18 were given a paper survey to fill out. Because the survey used parameters taken from the Creative Young Lives Survey, only secondary school students were included. This was to ensure that when Arts Council England release their survey, we can make comparisons to national findings. Primary students took part in discussion instead, reported later in this document.

We asked, **"Thinking of the arts and cultural activities you take part in (or have taken part in), what benefits do you get from them? (Tick all that apply)."** Table 1 displays the results.

Response Options	% of Participant Responses
I enjoy it	86.96%
I spend time with friends or meet new people	78.26%
I spend time with family	26.81%
I learn something new or develop a skill	74.64%
It helps me with my schoolwork	25.36%
It helps me with my future job plans	50.72%
It is good for my health or wellbeing	61.59%
Other	26.81%

Table 1. Perceived benefits of arts and cultural activity. N = 138. Two respondents ticked every option.

Qualitative Results

37 young people wrote their own answer under "Other". Table 2 groups these into themes, with examples below. Responses with more than one theme are counted more than once.

Confidence, Self-Expression and Identity

- **"** It helps you to build confidence through your life**"**
- "It helps me to feel more confident and calm when I step into a new place and meet new people"
- "Expressing my emotions healthily"
- "I get to be myself without having other people judge me"
- "Builds confidence talking to new people. An important skill!"

Learning and Personal Development

- "Learning about new things."
- "New experiences"
- "Helps with speaking and understanding body language or expression"
- "Gain discipline"

Culture and Heritage

- "It helps engage with people who have different cultural beliefs."
- "Learning about the world more."
- "When we had our cultural show at school I was able to get close with my friends and my heritage."

Social Connection, Community and Belonging

- "I feel like a part of something."
- "Supporting people I love."
- "Giving the youth somewhere to go."

Wellbeing

- "I can be a different person and feel free."
- "It helps with general life by getting me out of the house."
- "For boredom"
- "Forget things on my mind because I'm doing the things I love."
- "Being [in] a place to get away from your problems."
- "Staying fit and healthy, both physically and mentally."
- "It gives me lots of motivation."

Theme	%
Confidence, Self-Expression & Identity	28.9%
Learning & Personal Development	21.1%
Wellbeing	18.4%
Social Connections Community and Belonging	15.8%
Culture and Heritage	13.2%
Other / Unclear	5.3%
Accessibility & Practical Benefits	2.6%

Table 2. Other benefits by theme. N = 37. Responses with multiple themes were counted more than once, so percentages will not total 100.

The young people we surveyed see arts and culture as enjoyable and social, and as a way to develop skills. 62% said it benefits their health or wellbeing. This is notable given widely reported concern about youth mental health, including Prof Peter Fonagy's recent report which will inform forthcoming government policy. Our survey cannot show that arts engagement improves wellbeing, only that young people perceive it that way. Their perception is however strongly supported by robust evidence (see Bahr et al., 2026). ACE's Space to Breathe research explores creative health, which it defines as "the use of creative and cultural activities, processes and assets to enhance the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities" and highlights the role of peer-led projects. Creative Health Havering, which is closely aligned with FUSE, also focuses on community-based approaches. These perceptions, and the emphasis on peer-led work, are worth considering in FUSE's planning, including the network's discussions about a youth board.

So far, this review of local youth views on arts and cultural activities makes it clear that there is an appetite for such experiences. But what is preventing young people from engaging at the level they would like?

We asked**: "Which of these do you think prevent you from going to visit these places? (Tick all that apply)."**

Response Options	% of Participant Responses
I don't have time	47.10%
My parents or carers decide where I go	15.94%
I don't know what there is for me to do	28.26%
I don't want to go by myself	45.65%
I'm not allowed to go	11.59%
I feel too old to go	10.87%
I feel too young to go	15.94%
These places are difficult to get to or too far away	47.10%
I don't know how to get there	25.36%
I prefer to do other things in my spare time	22.46%
It costs too much money	57.97%
Due to my health condition, learning need or disability	5.80%
None of these	7.97%
Other	3.62%

Table 3. Perceived barriers to engagement. N = 138. Two respondents ticked every option.

Cost was the most common barrier (58%). Travel, time and not wanting to attend alone followed closely. Only 6% selected health, learning need or disability. This may reflect who took part rather than the level of need, and it should not be read as meaning access is not an issue.

40 young people gave their own answers under "Other".

Anxiety, Self-Confidence, Uncertainty and Fear of Judgement

- "Scared of talking to new people"
- "Confidence"
- "Social anxiety" (3 young people)
- "When doing anything in the arts which is competitive, for example dance, instructors and coaches make it seem there is always someone better than you... Sometimes I just want it to be enjoyable and not an every-week competition."
- "I feel out of place because of my anxiety"
- "Others' opinions"

Location, Transport and Accessibility

- "My dad drives me places but due to his work and time as a truck driver, it is hard to find the days he is off."
- "Most are far away from my home"
- "Too young to travel"

Lack of Interest or Motivation

- "They don't have things that necessarily I want to do."
- "I'm too lazy"
- "There isn't much to do"
- "I just go along with things"

Social Factors

- "Not finding anyone to do it with."
- "The people around me."
- "Not finding the right people to go with."

Time Pressures

- "I don't have time."
- "I have sports all the time."
- "Balancing your home/school life with these events."

Table 4 presents the responses from participants who selected "other" when asked about barriers and provided a written response. Responses with multiple themes are counted more than once.

Theme	% of Responses
Anxiety, Self-Confidence, Uncertainty, and Feeling Judged	32.5%
Location, Transport, and Accessibility	20.0%
Lack of Interest or Motivation	17.5%
Social Factors and Having People to Attend With	12.5%
Time Pressures and Other Responsibilities	15.0%
Other (Money, Cost, Rules)	12.5%

Table 4. "Other" barriers by theme. N = 40.

Social Anxiety

In line with ACE's Creative Young Live's categories, we did not include social anxiety as a specific option in the paper survey. This means we cannot compare with the 55% reported in 2023, when the question was asked differently. However, 46% said they did not want to attend activities alone, and anxiety and fear of judgement were the largest theme in written answers.

Under 12s

Primary pupils did not complete the survey. Facilitators led discussions about what might encourage or prevent a group of young people from going to an arts or cultural event. Pupils were not asked to share their own experiences.

Barriers to Engagement

- Sound sensitivity
- Teachers
- Trying something new can feel scary
- Homework and lunch teachers
- Stage fright
- Parents
- Mental health
- Growing up
- Worrying that it might be too hard
- Learning new things
- Nerves
- Someone saying it's not good for you
- Disability or health issues
- Worrying that you won't be included
- Bullying
- Negative feelings about yourself
- Buildings that feel like they are only for certain people (adults)
- Money

Benefits to Engagement

- Confidence
- Trying new things
- Expressing your feelings
- Being with others
- Doing things that make you happy
- Discovering a new aspect of yourself
- Learning how to use your spare time
- Seeing things from a different perspective
- Having fun

As with the secondary-aged groups, confidence and personal growth were seen as benefits, while worry and nerves were key barriers. Several of the barriers named here, such as stage fright, worrying about being included and negative feelings about yourself, point to anxiety, though this was general discussion rather than personal accounts.

What do Young People Want?

Facilitators led creative activities asking what young people would plan if money were no object. This let them think beyond the categories in the sticker charts. The word cloud shows ideas captured in discussion.



Groups then made a creative response. Those who preferred acting devised an advert for their dream event, those who preferred writing wrote an imagined review, and some made posters. Below are some examples of their work, as well a comment on the drama-based responses from workshop facilitator Tom Mangan.

“During the sessions, young people were tasked to create an advert for a hypothetical arts and culture event in Havering. What struck me about the responses to this was the wide variety of artistic happenings they wanted, which included (but was not limited to): drama performances, food stalls showcasing from around the world but brought by local people, local singers, workshops. They also acknowledged the difficulty of the cost of living, with responses including either free tickets or a pay-what-you-can option. Most events would take place over multiple days and multiple locations to increase reach and account for those who may have limited free time. What was clear was there was a focus on locally-produced work combined with a real desire to ensure the events were as accessible as possible to the local community.” **Tom Mangan.**

Below: Creative writing responses. Young people imagined a community arts event and then wrote imaginary reviews as if they'd attended.

Event Review

I went to The Arts Event hosted by Fuse ~~in Havering~~. a youth board of diverse students, commissioned by Fuse Havering, and it ~~good~~ was a great opportunity to tap into that culture, and opportunities to ~~don~~ help the community ~~good~~. They provided multiple sections dedicated to different forms of Art, it was a free event but allowed people to donate to any given charity. The people were welcoming and enthusiastic and they talked about ~~how people can find opportunities, the confidence etc~~ many important things such as how ~~fast~~ far creativity can get you, ~~the confidence to~~ how to build up confidence, and proving you can ~~do~~ be ~~in it~~ part of this world no matter your background, wealth, etc. They showcased so many cool styles as well and overall it was a really fun event that was fulfilling and beneficial. I definitely recommend going to this event that's lasting over a couple days.

★★★★★

At the Fuse Havering event for young people, there was a wide range of art forms. There were many stalls for different types of art and was really inclusive to everybody there. There were stalls for performers, stalls for painters, stalls for directors, stalls for designers, stalls for comic book artists, stalls for singers, stalls for musicians, stalls for dancers, and stalls for people who draw digitally / on paper. People could buy supplies for their art form and discover new types of art.

The event had a showcase at the end where performers, directors, designers, singers, musicians, and dancers could perform infront of an audience if they wanted to.

FUSE HAVERING

QUEEN'S THEATRE HORNCHURCH

My experience at the Arts and Culture festival in havering

diverse communities are joined together, in which they share a common interest: Arts and culture. Being able to attend this event was a huge privilege, as it was in a local area: Havering it made it easier for me to participate in this event, and ~~for~~ others can see the same aswell.

It was a delight to see people come to explore different topics under Arts and culture and discover more

I would extremely reccommend anyone ~~either~~ interested in arts and culture to attend, there are many mental benefits surrounding the festival, as it helps/supports people to talk and socialise encouraging this we are able to have a positive impact on people's future plans/careers.

Overall, this event was a huge pleasure and a great time to discover and find out more about Arts and culture.

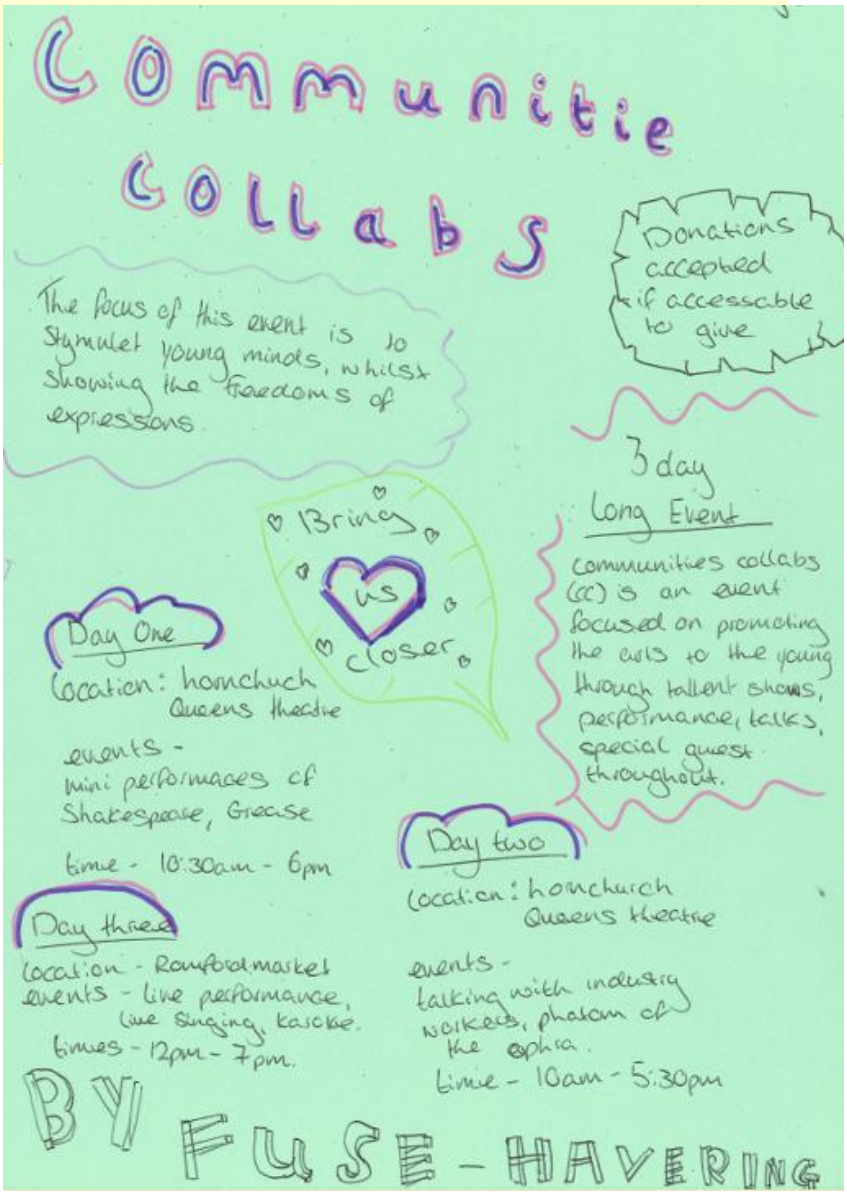
As a young women, inspired by performing arts and the theatrical side of things, I attended the Havering Carnival of Culture and the Arts. At this event I noticed a range of stalls that took my interest, yet had a feeling something was missing. In my opinion, to make this carnival the best that it could be it should showcase peoples' talents and passion for the arts. They should include more acting by having a stage and putting out an advert for people to come forward and performs duologues with their friends as well as monologues. The people behind the scenes, organising this event should put together a small play / short film for some more entertainment for enjoyment whilst appreciating the arts and culture.

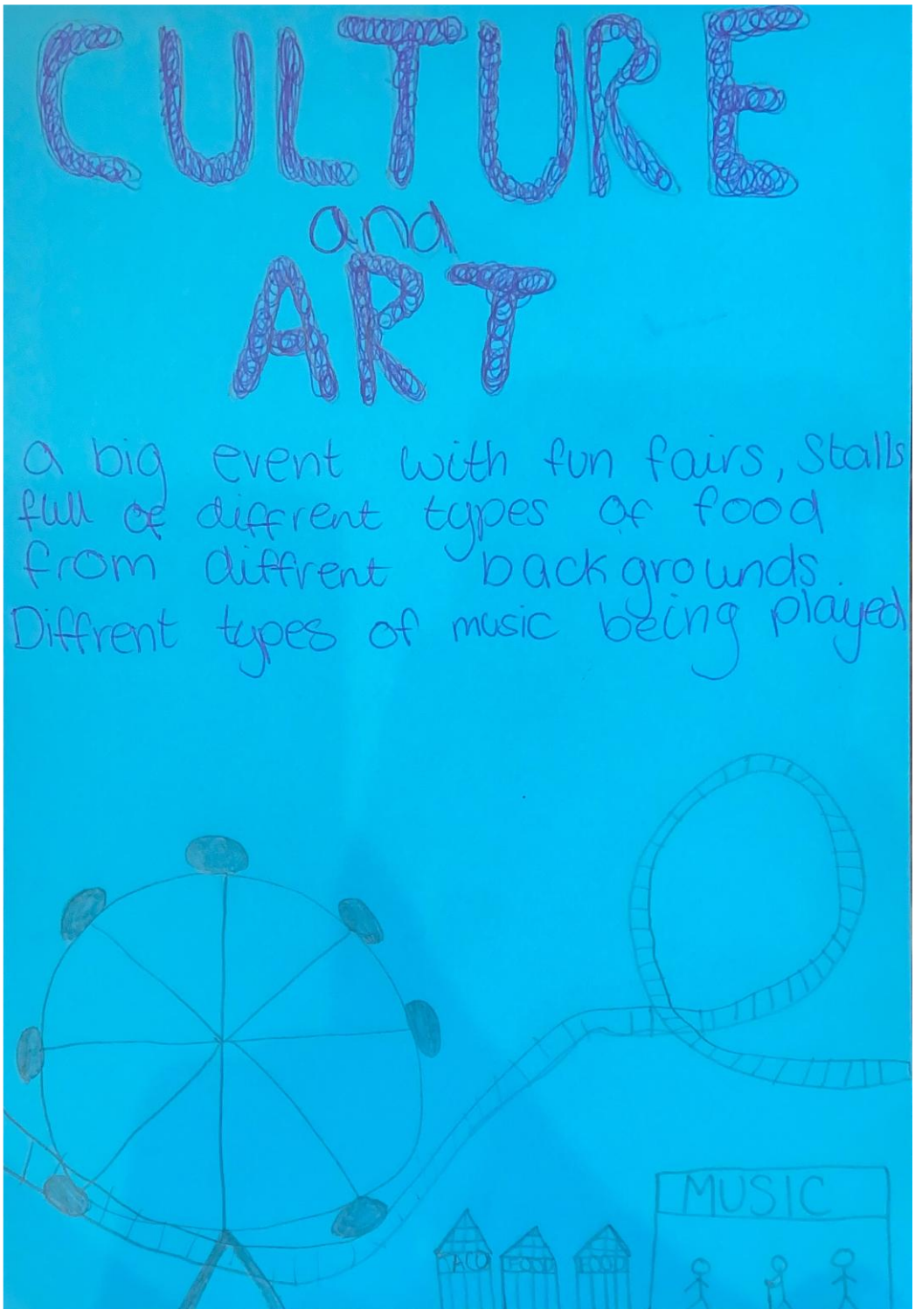
AT THE FUSE HAVERING EVENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, THERE WAS A WIDE RANGE OF ART FORMS. THERE WERE MANY STALLS FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF ART AND WAS REALLY INCLUSIVE TO EVERYBODY THERE. THERE WERE STALLS FOR PERFORMERS, STALLS FOR PAINTERS, STALLS FOR DIRECTORS, STALLS FOR DESIGNERS, STALLS FOR COMIC BOOK ARTISTS, STALLS FOR SINGERS, STALLS FOR MUSICIANS, STALLS FOR DANCERS, AND STALLS FOR PEOPLE WHO DRAW DIGITALLY / ON PAPER. PEOPLE COULD BUY SUPPLIES FOR THEIR ART FORM AND DISCOVER NEW TYPES OF ART.

THE EVENT HAD A SHOWCASE AT THE END WHERE PERFORMERS, DIRECTORS, DESIGNERS, SINGERS, MUCISIANS, AND DANCERS COULD PERFORM INFRONT OF AN AUDIENCE IF THEY WANTED TO.

Below: Visual art response. Young people created posters for their imaginary arts event.






CULTURE
and
ART
a big event with fun fairs, Stalls
full of diffrent types of food
from diffrent backgrounds.
Diffrent types of music being played
MUSIC

So, What's Next for FUSE?

This consultation shows that young people in Havering value arts and culture, and that there is appetite for more opportunities to take part. As well as performing and visual arts, young people's ideas of creative activity included food, animals, social experiences and cultural exchange.

They described arts and culture as joyful, social and useful for confidence, self-expression and wellbeing. The barriers they described were practical and emotional: cost, travel, time, not wanting to go alone, and lack of confidence or anxiety.

For FUSE, the next phase of activity should focus on affordability, local access, and creating peer-led or supported routes into participation. Building arts engagement into schools and existing youth settings may also help young people feel that creative activity belongs in their everyday lives, rather than being something separate, costly or only for certain people.

Limitations

- Groups were chosen by invitation and are not a representative sample of Havering.
- The paper survey covered secondary-aged respondents only. Primary pupils took part in discussion.
- Sticker charts and Post-it themes are approximate and were counted and sorted by hand.
- The 2023 and 2026 questions differed, so direct comparison is limited.
- ACE's Creative Young Lives Survey results are not yet published, so national comparison is not yet possible.

References

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Addendum

Since writing this report, Arts Council England have released the Creative Young Lives survey data. You can read the results at https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-young-lives-survey-0#t-in-page-nav-2.

Creative Young Lives Highlights

As with our local findings, time, money, travel and reticence to attend activities alone were the leading barriers to arts engagement nationally.

59% of those taking part in the Creative Young Lives survey said they'd like to do more creative activities, compared with 78% of young people we surveyed.

ACE found activity levels to peak between ages 5 and 10, with significant drop off at both 11 and 14.

Children eligible for free school meals were less likely to have engaged in arts activities. This was particularly the case for creative writing activities, where engagement was 15 percentage points higher among those not eligible for free school meals compared with those who were eligible.

The Creative Young Lives survey also compared engagement across boroughs, as shown below in Table 5.

Borough	*% of children aged 15 or under who visited an arts event or venue in the year prior to the survey.*
Havering	79%
Essex	91%
Thurrock	83%
Redbridge	81%
Newham	76%
Barking and Dagenham	74%
Tower Hamlets	81%
Hackney	78%
Waltham Forest	85%
Greenwich	73%
Bexley	86%
Lewisham	91%
Kent	92%