North East Artists' Fund

Final report 2022-23

Background

The North East Artists' Fund was set up in 2022 to fill the gap between unfunded activity and the minimum threshold (and output-based requirements) of grant funding. Intended as a pilot for a potential longer-term project, the fund was financed entirely by contributions from four key visual arts organisations — MIMA, Sunderland Culture, The NewBridge Project and Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

This report offers an appraisal of the pilot, from an overview of where and on what the funds went to the impact on recipients' practices, and their thoughts about the future.

Validating practice, catalysing activity

The North East Artists' Fund is based on the observation that a relatively small amount of money can sometimes have a disproportionately large impact on artists' careers if it is free of red tape and comes at the right time: whether a time of crisis, creative or practical block, or the cusp of a new exhibition or project. A few hundred pounds for research and experimentation, relatively unrestricted and with no expectation around outputs or reporting, can go a long way.

Importantly, this intervention can also act as a catalyst for further activity, and ultimately for future funding and opportunities for our region's practitioners. Ultimately this translates into further investment in the region itself, and greater retention of practitioners in the North East.

Above all else, the fund is providing validation of practitioners' careers and building their confidence about what the future might hold.

"The micro bursary is a useful funding model. As with many artists I find myself spending huge amounts of time looking for and applying for larger funding bids which are often unsuccessful.

The time spent writing these bids is not time spent in the studio, so the opportunity to apply for smaller amounts in this way to solve an immediate barrier to making a piece of work or carry out some research is useful.

Receiving a small grant can also be a much-needed boost to morale. I do hope that this model can be continued and even extended." — *Bursary recipient*

Removing barriers

The fund asks individuals to identify obstacles and then enables them to address them.

Applicants told us that the biggest barriers to their practices are lack of money, lack of time and problems with access. The North East Artists' Fund is well-placed to help with all of these — and it has, from the cost of materials and travel, to buying time out from caring duties for research, to studio equipment that relieves chronic pain and allows work to continue again.

"This is a hugely important fund to us as a collective. Alongside disability and other access barriers we have been struggling to make work together due to lack of child care and funding for travel between us. The fund will allow us to spend time making work together without the pressure of financial barriers.

This relatively small amount of money means an awful lot to us — thank you!"

— Bursary recipient

What have we learned?

This year's pilot has tested our model and gauged demand and support. We now know that:

Demand far outstrips supply!

A flexible fund which allows capital expenditure and doesn't require specific outputs is useful.

Practitioners face a range of challenges, but being offered the freedom to make and test new work is particularly valuable.

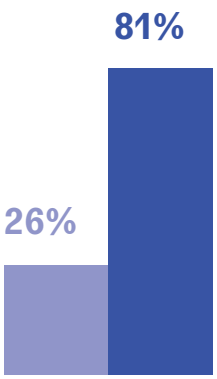
Application rates across the region vary dramatically, and that this isn't only a product of relative population density or the percentage of visual arts practitioners in each area. We think it's related to confidence in applying for funding, and need to commit more resources to publicity and application support.

Impact

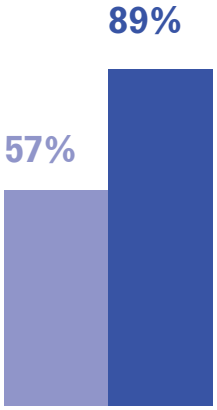
We asked awardees to complete a simple baseline questionnaire upon award, and then a second survey after they had completed their activity to gauge the impact of our funding and to track perception of the fund. Their answers form the basis of this report.

Before and after

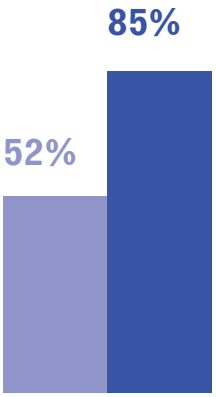
We asked artists how they felt about their practice before and after completing their activity.



of respondents felt that they have been able or very able to progress their practice over the last six months.



of respondents were confident or very confident about the direction in which their practice is headed.



of respondents were sure or very sure that they'd eventually get to where they wanted to be.

Facts and figures

Applicants and awards

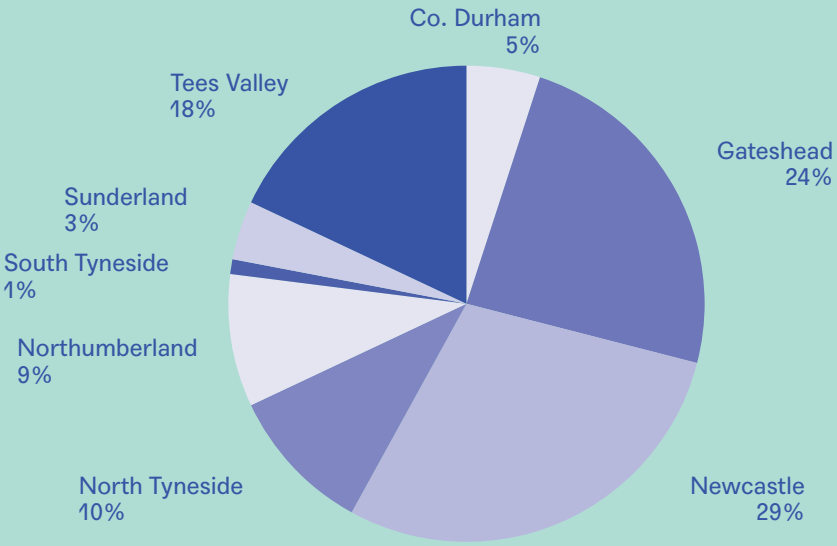
311
Eligible applications*

60
Awards made

£10,800
Total funds awarded

£74,319
Total funds requested

Geographical spread as % of total

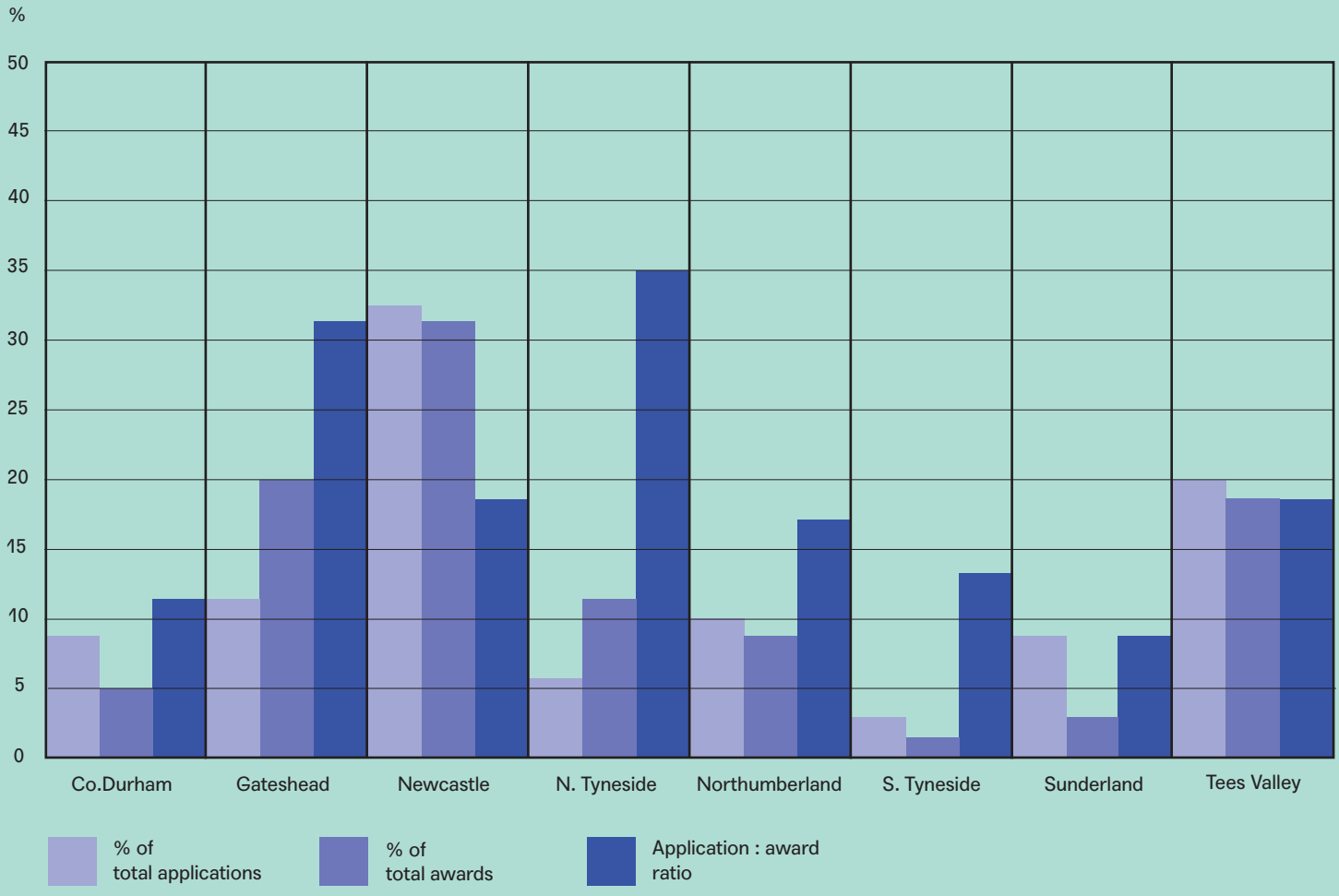


Partner investment

Partner	Area	Amount
Baltic	Gateshead	£4,000
Gateshead Council	Gateshead	£2,000
Sunderland Culture	Sunderland	£1,500
MIMA	Tees Valley	£2,500
The Newbridge Project	Newcastle	£800

Investment / awards by area

Area	Investment	Awards	Ratio
Tyneside	£6,800	£6,913	102%
Sunderland	£1,500	£346	23%
Tees Valley	£2,500	£1,972	79%
Durham	£0	£546	-
North'land	£0	£978	-



*From a total 361 applications

Analysis

Geographical distribution
The graph above shows data for applications and awards as percentages of the total for each, while the application-to-award ratio describes the percentage of applications that were successful in each area. What is perhaps most interesting overall is that, while the overall proportion of both applications and awards in Newcastle were highest, the ratio of applications to awards there was lower than, for instance, North Tyneside, and the same as the Tees Valley.

Between Rounds 1 and 2, a disparity between projected and actual application and award numbers in specific areas – in particular the Tees Valley – was addressed successfully by more active publicity, helped by project partners.

Trends across the region
The quality and eligiblity of applications was markedly different in some areas. North Tyneside, despite comprising a relatively low percentage of total applications, had by far the greatest success rate. With ineligible applications not shown here, County Durham fares reasonably well — but had suffered from a high number of ineligible applications.

Investment by area
For Year 1, provisional quotas for each area were agreed with our partners at the start of the project (a) based on concentration of practitioners and (b) reflecting the investment made, owing to the relatively small size of the overall pot.

We expected high numbers of applications from Newcastle and Gateshead, but for Round 1 were disappointed by takeup from the Tees Valley and Sunderland, in particular. There is a significantly high award rate in North Tyneside, which is due to the relative quality of applications from residents there, which we hadn't predicted.

"For me, it was about being recognised. This will help me and the opportunity given to me... the support is a moral boost too — that what I'm trying to achieve has been seen."— *Bursary recipient*

For Round 2, we worked to increase applications from areas of lower take-up.

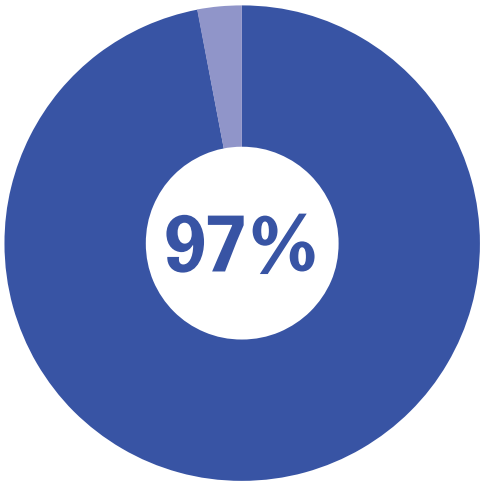
The investment by area largely relates to the amount of investment. The exceptions to this are, firstly, a much lower total award figure for Sunderland, and secondly, the presence of awards in Northumberland and Durham, which weren't representated by partners and had no area-specific investment.

This system was appropriate for our pilot, but for 2023, we want to ensure adequate representation – and therefore investment – from each area.

In future, we will dedicate increased resources to support these areas, and will mirror ACE's Priority Places agenda where it makes sense to, in County Durham and the Tees Valley in particular.

"This bursary will allow me immediate access to specialist equipment that I need to complete a commission. It will enable me to focus on making without the worry of the financial implications of hiring equipment." — *Bursary recipient*

How easy was the application process?



97% of applicants found the process easy or very easy.

Learning — and action

What we learned It's harder to attract appliations from some areas than others.

Sunderland, South Tyneside and the Tees Valley, in particular, generated far fewer applications than expected for Round 1. For Round 2, we worked pro-actively with partners to publicise the fund more in Sunderland and the Tees Valley, but we lacked enough local intelligence in South Tyneside. While these efforts paid off for the Tees Valley, we failed to augment numbers from Sunderland or South Tyneside to the extent we'd hoped.

What we'll do We'll devote more resources to actively target applications from those areas.

We'll work to more effectively solicit applications actively from areas of lower takeup. With a greater spread of partners across more of the region, we'll draw on their local knowledge and ask for some baseline help promoting the fund via social media – both themselves and via delegated organisations in their area – but we will also consider in-person and online workshops / roadshows / info sessions in selected areas to support applicants and encourage applications that are as robust and relevant as possible (we could tie this in with a wider funding workshop, perhaps).

Fund visibility and takeup will also be helped by the existence of our new website, as well as a greater number and geographical spread of partners.

What we learned It helps the simplicity of our application process to forgo questions about demographics, but not necessarily the future of the fund.

We took the decision not to include questions about demographics – beyond geography – in the pilot, as although these questions are ubiquitous they can be intrusive and, often, somewhat unnecessary — and the difference of the North East Artists' Fund was signalled, in part, by the lack of these more bureaucractic details.

What we'll do In order to ensure we're distributing funds as fairly, and in as representative a way as possible, we need to gather more data.

However, it would be useful at the very least in future to know more about the gender, age and ethnic diversity of applications, alongside the proportion of those with additional access needs (which from observation seems to be quite high, which is interesting — especially given comments to the effect that most funding applications are not remotely disability-friendly)

We'll include baseline demographic questions on the application form in future.

> "Without this I don't feel so confident that I would have had the motivation to continue with some of my projects."
>
> — *Bursary recipient*

What we learned We need to make sure that our funding model is fit for purpose — and that it can deliver.

For the pilot, we agreed to create two separate funding streams: a rolling, fast-track option for micro-bursaries of £100 and under, which would be assessed by Art Network North East directly and offered a decision within 10 days; and two application rounds for micro-bursaries of over £100, each with deadlines and decisions delivered by selection panels.

What we'll do Check with partners for Year 2 that this model is still right

We're lucky that some of this year's partners will also join us for Year 2 —while the new partners will undoubtedly bring fresh perspectives to the group. We'll recommend continuing this model with (a) three funding rounds, as opposed to two, and (b) possibly an increased % allocation for sub-£100 awards. We'll suggest that there is an opportunity for review after Round 1.

What we learned It doesn't hurt to include partners on the selection panel —and may even help artists more.

For the first funding panel, we committed to ensuring that panelists would have no stake in the fund, so asked colleagues from organisations other than our partners. This was designed to prevent conflicts of interest, perceived or otherwise. but we question its necessity or sustainability.

Firstly, given that we stand to have many more organisations represented as partners in Year 2 of the fund, it will be harder, relatively, to secure people with no link to the fund, and secondly, it seemed as though one benefit of the fund, for potential and actual partners, is to gain a greater understanding of where and how activity is taking place across the region, and about individual practitioners' practices and needs. It not only seems like a good idea for stakeholders, current or future, to be better informed about activity in the region, but given that it has already translated into an increased financial commitment from partners, is materially beneficial for artists too.

What we'll do We should revisit our own processes around selection to ensure they're fit for purpose and as flexible as possible.

We propose that future iterations of the funding panel balance a mixture of partners and independent members, and that all conflicts of interest are recorded.

What we learned Managing the fund demands many more resources that we'd expected.

In 2022-23, all of the funds contributed by our partners went straight towards the micro-bursaries. We hadn't allowed for the costs — from staff time, web support and hosting, to travel to meetings.

Art Network North East has a core annual budget of c. £2,000, and staff time equating to 3 days pw, which has to cover a range of activity. The significant demand that the fund placed on the organisation – from R&D to negotiation with partners, reporting and day-to-day operation, which included processing all applications and, in particular, making decisions for all sub-£100 applications throughout the period the fund was live, meant that other core work was neglected.

What we'll do Ensure the fund is as robust as possible by reserving a small amount for our admin costs

For Year 2, 10% of partner contributions will go towards easing this burden — and enabling wraparound activity, from web features to events, which helps to publicise the fund, especially to areas which previously saw lower takeup.

What we learned It would be useful to be able to publicise selected awardees' stories more widely.

It's useful to be able to share award recipients' comments in this report, but it would be good to be able to share some of them further — both to demonstrate the benefits of the fund to the sector and to help humanise it for would-be future applicants, especially from under-represented parts of the region.

What we'll do We'll ask for permission to identify selected applicants' feedback

We'll go back to a few Year 1 recipients whose feedback – included here – could be particularly helpful for future applicants and ask if we can attribute their comments publicly, alongside a photo or video.

"This award will allow me to receive constructive feedback and guidance for the direction of my practice, build confidence in presenting myself and my work, and allow me to overcome some communication difficulties I experience due to being autistic." — *Bursary recipient*

Opportunities

How many of the following do applicants feel they currently enjoy access to…
…and for those they didn't select, which would they most benefit from access to?

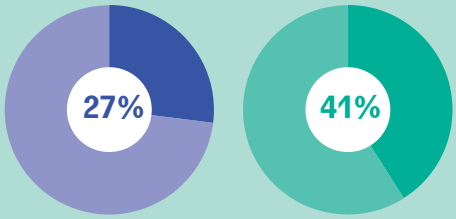
Only a quarter of awardees felt they had enough opportunities to exhibit at present, with over half suggesting they needed more.

Access to resources was a reasonably big subject, with only a quarter feeling they have adequate access to materials, and only 19% for production support, workshops and facilities.

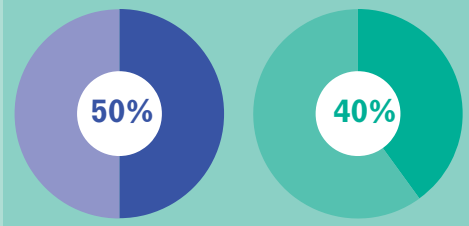
A recurrent theme of this and earlier surveys suggests a means to project outside of the region – here in the form of opportunities to travel – is a big issue, with only 12% currently feeling able to do so.

Peer support

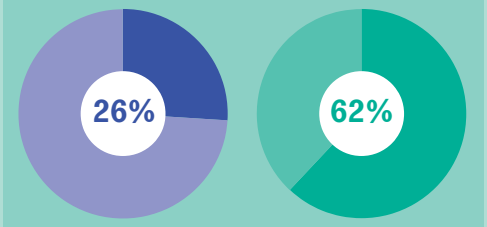
Practice / professional development



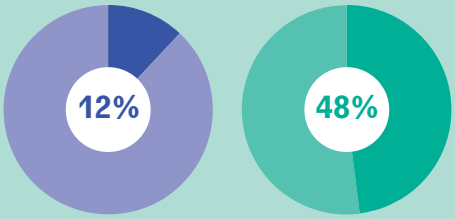
Opportunities to make new work



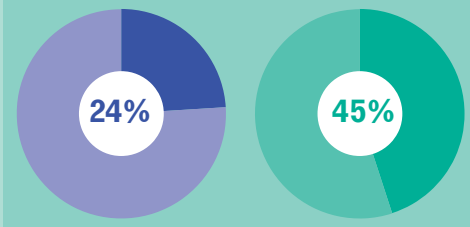
Opportunities to exhibit



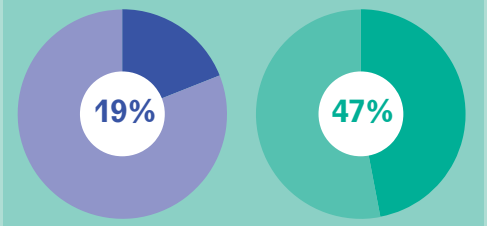
Production support



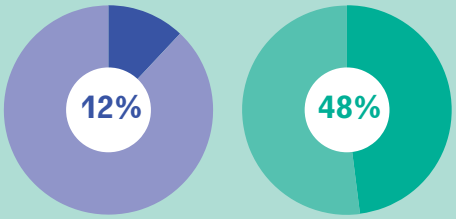
Sufficient access to materials



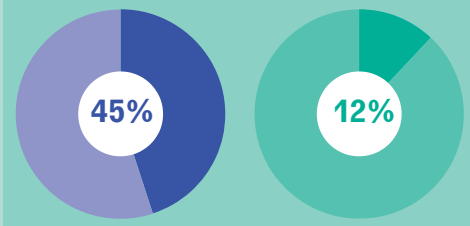
Sufficient access to workshops / facilities



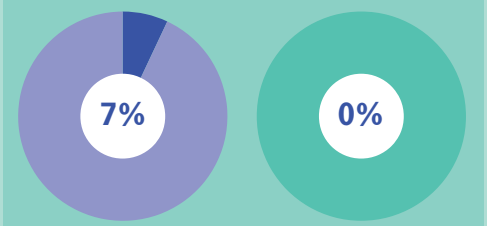
Opportunities to travel



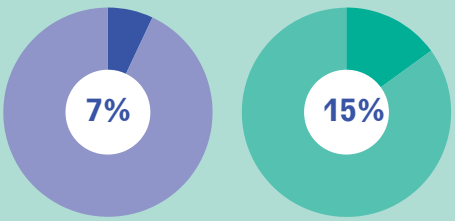
Relevant information, reference, resources etc.



None of the above



Other (see right)



-The NewBridge Project Collective Studio
-Studio space
-Online peer support
-Support from non-art organisations
-Access to the above, but outside NE
-Support/access for bipolar — writing grant applications, etc.
-Being paid for the time it takes to develop and produce new work
-Support balancing salaried and self-employed work
-In-person peer support
-Affordable studio spaces in the NE
-Tailored professional development opportunties

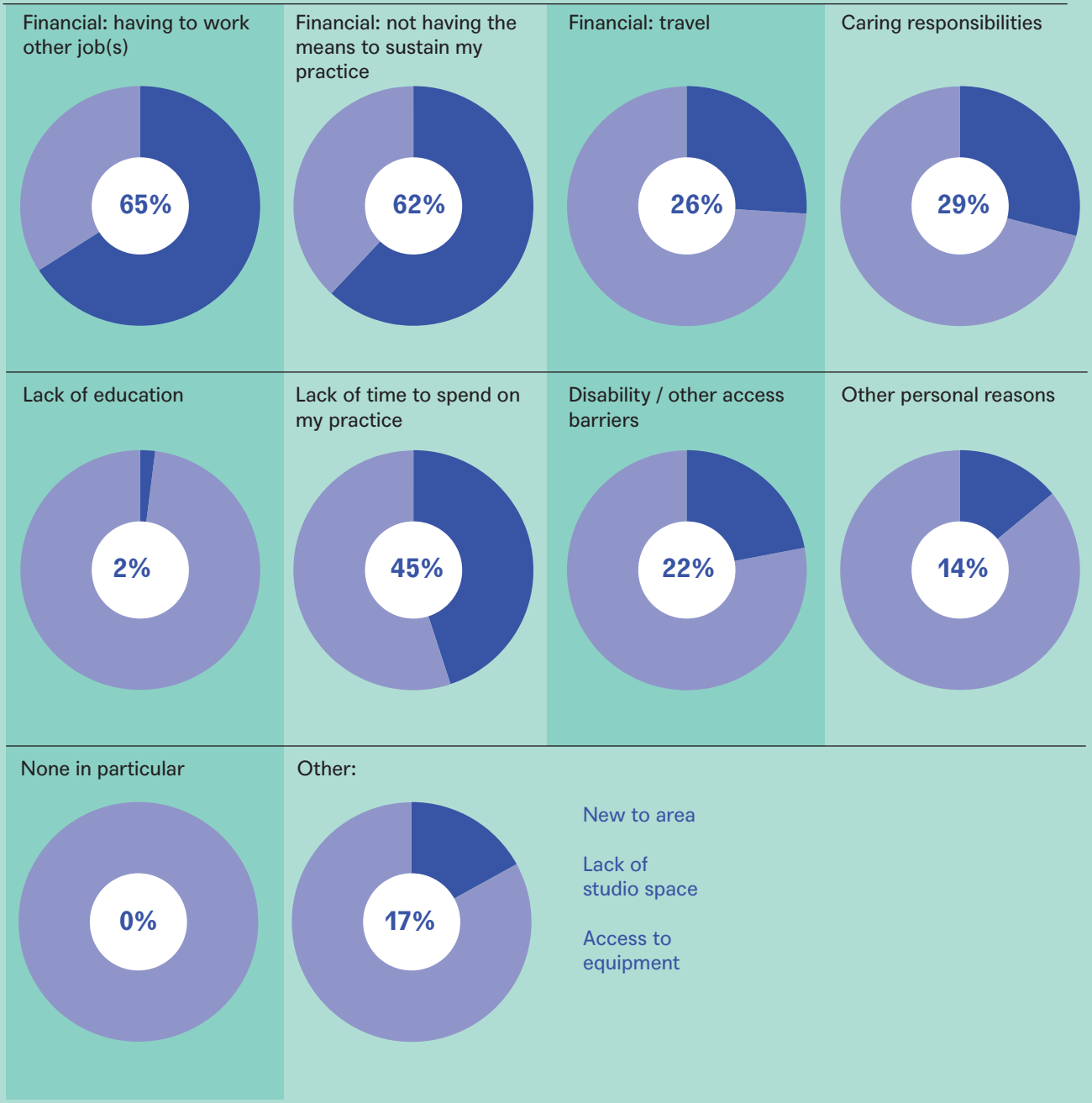
What's stopping artists?

Ignoring the North East Artists' Fund and their particular application, what do applicants consider the biggest barriers to their practice right now?

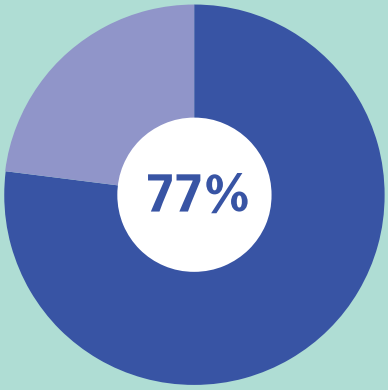
A lack of time or money, unsurprisingly, ranked highest among the obstacles faced by respondents.

Where respondents offered other responses, they ranged from very specific needs ("I need a studio" and "I need access to a kiln") to structural observations about the sector.

> The fact that artists and their practice do not seem to be valued in and of themselves. Many opportunities exist for community engagement and/or participatory practice but far fewer for artists whose work does not encompass these approaches." — *Bursary recipient*

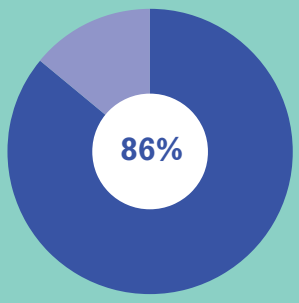


Changing perceptions

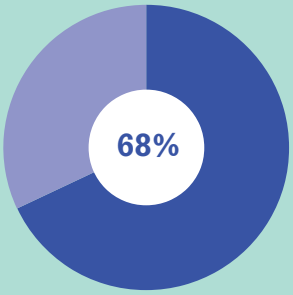


77% of respondents say the way they feel about their practice has changed as a result of their North East Artists' Fund award — in the following ways…

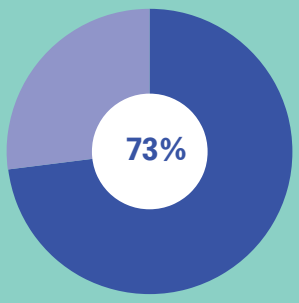
I've been able to make work / do something which I wouldn't otherwise have been able to



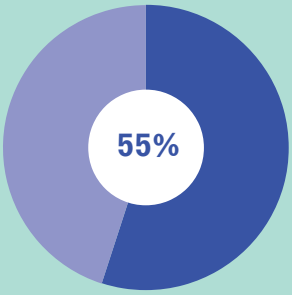
The funding has made my work / project / practice easier



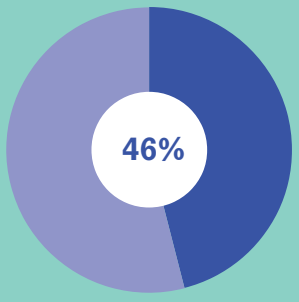
The funding has removed an obstacle



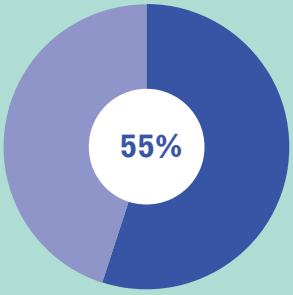
I feel more confident about my practice



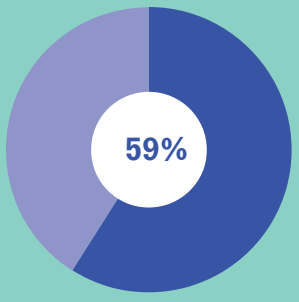
I have a clearer idea about what's next



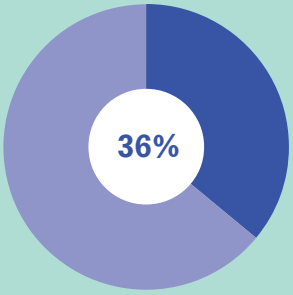
Being successful with the application has validated my practice



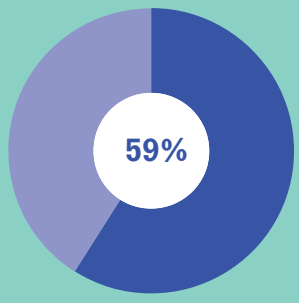
I feel more confident about applying for funding



The funding has made other things possible



I'm more able to make more work as a result



Other

It gave me the opportunity to interact with the broader artistic community

It enabled me to do a course

"As a result of this opportunity I have a fire in my belly."

— *Bursary recipient*

How will the micro-bursary most help your practice?

Enabling experimentation and collaboration

It will help to shift my thinking back to production and output, and provide a push for more research and experimentation.

It will allow me to travel and expand my network.

It will help me to connect with another artist and update my equipment so that I can work more effectively

Increasing confidence

I am starting to enjoy the freedom of working with others … and so this money also opens up this as a possibility.

It offers recognition to my practice. It will enable me and keep me motivated to work towards making new work. It makes me feel like what I am doing is valid.

To allow me to experiment without the financial pressure of being precious about materials... not restricting myself incase I 'ruin' any expensive materials.

Making & showing

I can afford to buy materials that I wouldn't have been able to afford.

This bursary will allow me to focus on making without the worry of the financial implications of hiring equipment.

It will allow me to become more independent in my practice and allow me to make work without worrying about financial pressure as much.

It means an incentive to make new work after a long hiatus.

This will allow me immediate access to specialist equipment that I need to complete a commission.

It will go towards my first exhibition and will allow me to showcase my work to the public which is really important for me at this stage in my career.

I can buy materials I would struggle to afford otherwise, and will be able to create work of a higher standard now I can purchase decent materials to create with.

Improving access

To adapt space and buy tools suitable for me. I manage chronic pain so adapting is essential.

Generating income

To have a framed print ready for any future exhibition/art fair opportunities could help generate some income.

Having a small toolkit will allow me to begin making work again as having left university I had the drive to continue making work but no tools to enable this … being able to actually make things is massively important to me.

It will allow me to purchase material to build a robust workbench for me to work comfortably and safely.

To give me both a means of developing my practice and a revenue stream through sales.

By taking away some of the strain through the equipment that will be purchased, I hope to regain enjoyment in an area of my practice that I find physically challenging.

It will help with the security for our new studios, making it a place where artists can feel safe and can therefore work without worry.

In five years' time...

I'd like to have become more financially resilient through my own craft and practice without so much reliance on other precarious modes of income.

I'd want to have a body of relevant and engaging work that is connected to local, regional, national and international platforms, and a practice is embedded into a well connected ecology

Gaining appreciation not just in the North East

A healthy work / life balance.

I'd like to have a stronger network in the arts … and to be in a position financially where I can devote at least 50% of my time to my arts practice.

I would like to have learned skills from others and feel confident enough in my own skills to begin to pass them onto others myself.

I hope to be established on a national scale… offered work, as opposed to applying for opportunities through open calls.

I hope I can be a full time artist

I'd hope to be in a position where I'm able to develop self initiated projects that are collaborative in nature working with practitioners from a range of disciplines.

Exhibit regularly nationally and internationally

Exhibiting more often; being able to work less in non-art jobs

I'll just be glad to be making things in a sustainable way.

I hope to be a full-time professional practising artist, no longer having to rely on teaching for my income

I'd want to be able to work part time to sustain my practice, rather than have my practice fit around my full time job, in the few hours a week I can scrape together.

I'd like to be able to work part time to sustain my practice...rather than have my practice fit around my full time job, in the few hours a week I can scrape together. I want to be excited about my practice!

I would like to evolve my practice to be able to have a hybrid of commercial/ private work alongside public art and participatory art commissions.

I would like to be exhibiting outside of the region regularly

I'd want to have developed strong skills in carpentry and metalwork.

I would like to continue developing my ideas … hopefully move towards working as a full time artist.

I'd hope to have deepened peer networks.

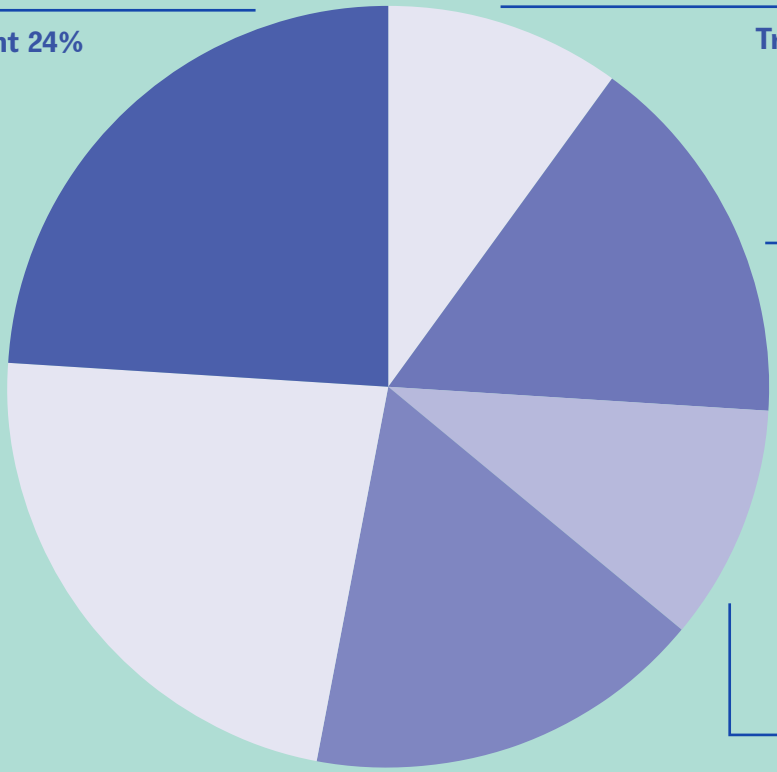
What did the funds fund?

As the chart below shows, the micro-bursaries funded a large variety of different activity — from practice development and research to tools and materials. Some applications concerned immediate obstacles, while others looked ahead to costs connected with upcoming projects, or else long-standing barriers which investment in particular equipment could help to remove.

What connected all was a sense of preparation for the future — and in addition to the many comments we received as part of the evaluation process (a selection of which are included in this report), we had anecdotal feedback from many applicants that the freedom to choose what they spent the money on was crucial. Where their applications concerned capital purchases, this was often framed as their only opportunity to do so, as scant other funds allowed this. Where they applied for R&D – whether to cover specific expenses such as travel expenses, or more speculative or indirect costs such as childcare, we heard from them that this too was unique at this level and ease of application.

Together, this activity – whether equipment or research time – represents an urge by applicants to invest in their future. From materials to fuel future projects to training around new processes which would in turn open up new sources of income, two things emerged as palpably clear: first, that small interventions can have a disproprtionately large positive impact on artists' careers, and second, that artists know what they need and generally have a good sense of how to get there.

If such relatively tiny investment can have such impact, it led us to imagine what support on a larger scale might unlock.



Research & Development 24%
Mentoring
Childcare
Library access
Research time
Travel

Training & Tuition 10%
Risograph printing
Welding
Ceramics
Screen printing
Knitting machine

Materials 16%
Camera film
Canvas
Glaze & clay
Perspex
Ornate tabletop
Primer
Wood
Plasterboard
Glass
Mirrors
Paper
132 plastic footballs

Tools & equipment 23%
3D printer
Motors
Pottery wheel
Printing press
Woodworking tools
Airbrushes
Glass grinder
Microphone
Phone lens
Paper cutter
Four-channel audio interface

Workspaces 10%
Access to workshops
Studio relocation costs
Studio security gate
Workbench
Studio rent

Production 17%
Production costs
Framing
Tests, experiments & prototypes

11% of the total was spent on addressing access-related issues

Anything else?

It was a fantastically simple process, which is a major boon when working in the arts where time-making-art-and-not-filling-out-endless-applications is so valuable. Thank you so much!

Thank you very much for this opportunity, without this I don't feel so confident that I would have had the motivation to continue with some on my projects.

The whole process was so straightforward and I'm very happy to have been selected to receive the very useful funds.

Seamless, paid quickly, perfect application form, and success rate. Thank you.

I have received wonderful service and am very pleased with how my queries were answered.

Very validating and aware of the needs of artists. A million times better than North of Tyne Creative and Culture Funds. Please advise them and others of how to do this.

A huge thank you, the support has really helped my current research and helped towards developing my practice.

It was a really simple process and as stress free as possible.

Thank you for supporting my practice, it's had a huge impact on my confidence and ability to produce work more efficiently.

The process was extremely easy and I appreciated the fact that the fund trusts that you'll spend the money where you said you would — it takes away the pressure to follow up and write about the award like other funding bodies require you to, and instead lets you focus on continuing making.

Thanks again, the funds have made a good difference to my practice and boosted me out of a weird long slump I was in.

It was really good that you could access up to £100 quickly.

I was very happy with how the application process was carried out and the quickness in getting back to me meant I could make plans quickly and start work on ideas.

A big thanks to Art Network North East!

This award is great! Made me feel a lot more confident to apply to funding as the process was simple.

As a result of this opportunity I have a fire in my belly!

The application was straightforward, money paid in good time.

The micro bursary is a useful funding model. As with many artists I find myself spending huge amounts of time looking for and applying for larger funding bids which are often unsuccessful. The time spent writing these bids is not time spent in the studio, so the opportunity to apply for smaller amounts in this way to solve an immediate barrier to making a piece of work or carry out some research is useful. Receiving a small grant can also be a much needed boost to morale. I do hope that this model can be continued and even extended.

Though a small amount of money, the ease of the application and freedom to what you could apply for made for small attainable goals. Being able to have just that little extra money made it possible for me to travel to Liverpool and see a gallery space that has the scope to show my kind of practice. I didn't realise how important it would be to physically be in that environment, yet now realised it was a major blockage in imagining my kind of work in a gallery.

Thank you!!!! The funding opened up a whole new way of making in my practice, and thinking of my work. And the outcomes were well-received.

I feel this award was a very significant start for me — I now have faith in this award body, and it would be nice to be able to step up to another level with this same body. I'm extremely wary of arts funding, and have only ever been told that it's a waste of time.

What's next?

The North East Artists' Fund returns in June for 23/24 with more than double the total funding of the original pilot project and commitment from key local authorities alongside arts organisations.

Key dates for Year 2

Launch	Applications — proposed	Evaluation
Partners announced w/c 3 July 2023 Fund opens 10 July 2023	Round 1 10 July – 31 August 2023 Decisions 22 September Round 2 1 October – 30 November 2023 Decisions 22 December Round 3 8 January – 29 February 2024 Decisions 22 March	Survey 1 Open 31 August – 31 March Survey 2 Open 1 December – 31 May Interim report published 19 April 2024 Full report published 28 June 2024

Year 2 partners

The Auxiliary
Baltic
Darlington Borough Council
Durham County Council
Gateshead Council
MIMA
The NewBridge Project
Newcastle City Council
North Tyneside Council
Northumberland County Council
Sunderland City Council

About us

Art Network North East is the new name for North East CVAN. We're an advocacy and development organisation for the visual arts, working with individuals and organisations across the region to support existing activity, effect change where it's needed, and raise the profile of the North East nationally.

We have an office at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead but work across the region. We're part of the England-wide Contemporary Visual Arts Network and are funded by Arts Council England.

Our full website, featuring listings for the region alongside a directory of practitioners and more, will launch in July —> **anne.art**.

Thank you to our Y1 partners, without whom the North East Artists' Fund wouldn't have been possible.

BALTIC

MIMA Teesside University

SUNDERLAND CULTURE

The NewBridge Project

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E-mail addresses and social media accounts are in the process of transitioning to Art Network North East handles

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