Progress under pressure:

Creative Access Thrive Report

CREATIVE ACCESS

Thrive

July 2026

Contents

Introduction

The creative industries continue to navigate an increasingly challenging landscape.

At a time when the UK's creative success depends on attracting, retaining and developing the widest possible range of talent, more creative professionals are questioning whether they can afford to stay. Rising costs, economic uncertainty, rapid advances in AI and a more complex policy and public environment around inclusion are creating new pressures for employers and individuals alike.

The findings in this year's Thrive report suggest the challenge facing the creative economy is no longer simply one of access. It is one of sustainability. Who gets to build a long-term career in the creative industries? Who has access to the opportunities, support and progression needed to succeed? And, if we fail to act, whose talent will we lose?

These questions have never felt more urgent. Nearly 1 million young people in the UK are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET),[1] while many employers are struggling to fill skills gaps and facing constraints on workforce investment. Without meaningful intervention, we are at risk of losing a generation of talent and the diversity of voices and ideas which power our industry.

And yet, there are grounds for optimism. Throughout the report, we see clear evidence that targeted support makes a huge difference. Individuals in receipt of Creative Access services (IRCAS) report stronger outcomes across confidence, progression and career optimism, while employers engaging with our programmes are more likely to report progress on representation, equity and inclusion.

1. DWP, Young people and work: interim report, June 2026

This year also marks an important milestone for Creative Access. Together with Futures for All and Creative UK, we are proud to be part of the Creative Careers Collective – a national consortium that has secured a DCMS grant to deliver the Discover Creative Careers programme over the next three years. The programme will support young people across the UK to explore, prepare for and pursue opportunities in the creative industries, with a particular focus on improving access for those from under-represented backgrounds and underserved regions.

While some findings in this report remain concerning, they also point towards practical solutions where progress is already taking shape. Our hope is that the insights and recommendations shared will support collective action to help build a creative economy that is more inclusive to all.

Mel Rodrigues
CEO, Creative Access
July 2026

Methodology

Now in its fifth year, the Thrive report by Creative Access (CA) provides an annual snapshot of how under-represented talent and employers are experiencing work, progression and inclusion across the creative economy.

The report combines longitudinal survey data to understand how experiences are changing across sectors and where interventions are having the greatest impact over time.

This year's findings are based on responses gathered from individuals within our community and employers connected to our DE&I programmes and services. Separate surveys were sent to two groups:

Individuals
Individuals in receipt of support from CA (including interns, alumni, mentees), alongside individuals registered to our Opportunities Board and the wider creative community who had not received support from our services.

Employers
Organisations who had purchased services from CA and those who had not, across our wider employer partner network.

Over a 3-week period, we received almost 300 responses in total.

Individual breakdown by demographics and career stage

40% Black, Asian or ethnically diverse backgrounds

37% Lower socioeconomic backgrounds

22% Disabled

42% Entry-level

21% Junior-level

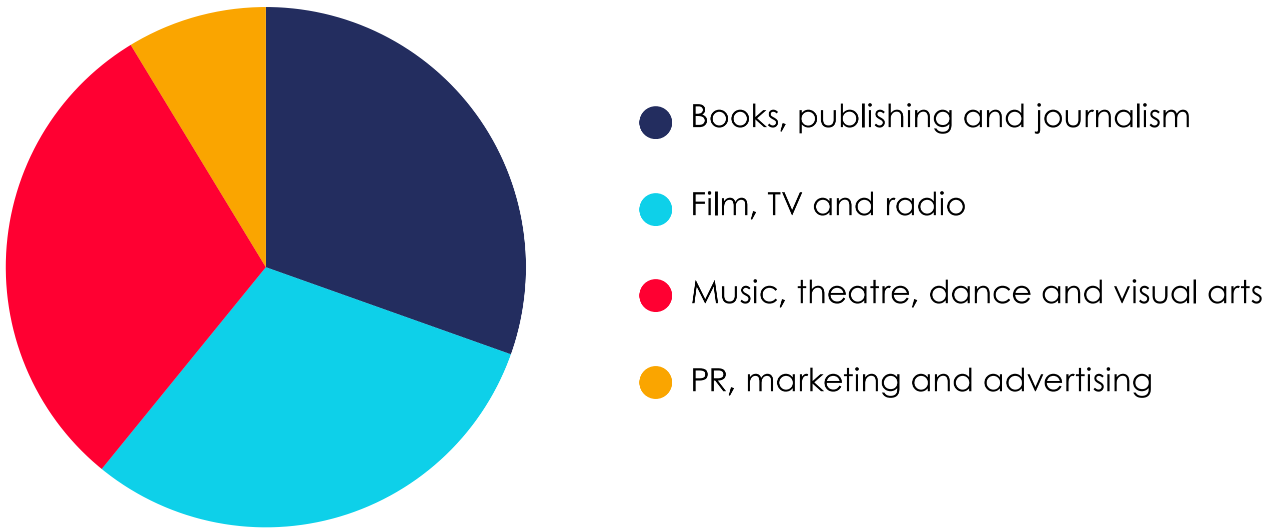
28% Mid-level

9% Senior-level

	Overall %	BAED %	Disabled %	Lower SES %
In receipt of services from CA	82	37	18	31
Not in receipt of services from CA	18	3	4	6
Total %	100	40	22	37

Employer breakdown by sector and size

This report focuses on the sectors which received the highest response rate.



45%

from organisations with 49 or fewer FTE

30%

from organisations with 50-249 FTE

25%

from organisations with 250 or more FTE

Executive summary

A sector under pressure

The creative industries are continuing to navigate a period of significant change. Economic uncertainty, rising living costs, evolving workplace expectations, rapid technological advancements and decreasing investments in DE&I initiatives are transforming how individuals enter, progress and remain within the sector.

This year's findings reveal a complex picture. While there are encouraging signs of progress across representation, career development and organisational commitments to inclusion, many of the barriers facing under-represented talent remain firmly in place. Across individuals and employers alike, progress is increasingly shaped by access to support, investment and opportunity.

Support drives outcomes

A recurring theme we've consistently seen throughout the years is the importance of support. Individuals in receipt of Creative Access services (IRCAS) reported stronger outcomes across career progression, confidence and optimism compared to those who had not accessed our support.

Among IRCAS respondents, **85%** said CA had a significant impact on their career, **65%** reported progressing in their career and **71%** are optimistic about their future career prospects. **More than half** also agreed their organisation had made progress on DE&I.

Support was especially valuable for groups facing some of the greatest challenges to progression. Among D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent respondents, **65%** of those who had accessed support felt they had the knowledge and skills needed to advance their careers, compared with just **37%** of those who had not.

But it's not just about short-term support. Sustained investment in talent delivers lasting impact, with nearly **two-thirds** of those IRCAS remaining in the creative economy more than 2 years after completing their programme.

The price of a creative career

Across many under-represented groups, concerns around financial security remain significant, which has inevitably led to a growing divide between those able to access support and those navigating the creative economy alone.

At the same time, optimism and progression remain closely linked to access, networks, development opportunities and targeted support. BAED talent and those from lower SES backgrounds recorded some of the most positive shifts in confidence and career optimism, reaching their strongest levels in four years.

Sector-level findings also suggest cautious signs of recovery, particularly within film, TV and radio, where the proportion of respondents feeling optimistic about their career rose to **38%** from **30%** in 2025.

Despite these positive signs, over **four in five** respondents reported experiencing financial pressure, while **two-thirds** said they had considered leaving the creative industries. The sector must urgently address the impact of financial insecurity and limited progression opportunities on under-represented creative professionals, or risk siphoning experienced talent to other industries.

DE&I at a crossroads

Amidst a more challenging creative environment, our findings show that employer commitment to DE&I remains strong. Many organisations now view themselves as leaders in this space, and larger companies report improvements in the diversity of their creative outputs.

While there are clear signs of progress and stability, the sector finds itself at a crossroads. **43%** of employers reported their workforce had become more representative in the past year. However, these improvements in representation have not always translated into broader organisational change as only **15%** reported an increase in equitable access to progression opportunities. Experiences also varied across sectors, with PR, marketing and advertising showing the highest uplift in workforce representation **(60%)** and publishing reporting some of the strongest outcomes on equitable distribution of progression and reward **(63%)**.

Commitment to DE&I remains firm, but investment is slowing. **Three quarters** of the employers we reached out to have maintained existing levels of DE&I spend, whereas only **15%** increased their funding, down from **44%** in 2025.

The rapid adoption of AI tools adds another layer of complexity to the changing landscape. Employer use of Generative AI (Gen AI) has risen to **75%**, however, more than **seven in ten** respondents have not received training. As these disruptive technologies become increasingly embedded within the creative industries, ensuring equitable access to training and support is critical to preventing existing inequalities from widening.

Our 2026 Thrive report clearly demonstrates the creative industries are moving forward, but not on an equal footing. Progress in inclusion, career development and innovation is evident, but too often remains uneven and fragile. The challenge ahead is clear: we must work together to turn pockets of progress into lasting change and build a creative economy where talent from every background has an equal opportunity to thrive.

Individual snapshot:
Fluctuating optimism

In 2026, individuals navigating the creative industries report significant career challenges, barriers to progression and declining levels of optimism. With the NEET crisis and increasing financial pressures affecting professionals at every career stage across the UK, the creative economy has reached a critical juncture.

D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent are experiencing the sharpest decline in optimism since 2025,[1] while optimism within the music, theatre, dance and visual arts sector has fallen dramatically. In 2025, **65%** of respondents in this sector said they felt optimistic about their career progression; this year, that figure has almost halved to just **35%**.

Despite these challenges, our community continues to benefit from CA support. IRCAS individuals reported more positive outcomes across all key measures (including knowledge and skills, confidence, optimism, and access to contacts and networks) than those who had not accessed our support. On career progression, **85%** of IRCAS respondents said CA had made a 'significant' or 'very significant' positive impact, while **73%** gained the necessary knowledge and skills needed to advance.

> **Creative Access has impacted my career within journalism really positively** and I'm very grateful. I frequently depend on using Creative Access, especially... when I want to **connect with other professionals** naturally at mixers/in-person events.
>
> Audience editor working in journalism, Creative Access alumni

1. Creative Access, Thrive report 2025: An industry in flux, July 2025

While optimism around career progression has declined consistently across all groups since 2022, respondents IRCAS reported higher levels of optimism than those who had not accessed CA support.

> Getting this internship has **massively boosted my self-esteem**. I was really struggling to get a job in the creative industries and **now I feel like I have a solid chance** for any future jobs I apply to.
>
> Creative Access intern working in publishing sector

Although a government funding boost of £380 million is expected to help stabilise and sustain the creative sector, our community continues to face significant challenges. Set against a broader backdrop of industry contraction and reduced investment in DE&I initiatives[2] in recent years, the decline in optimism is unfortunately unsurprising.

If left unaddressed, steep competition, a current oversupply of junior talent, looming skills gaps, and the continued loss of mid-career professionals to other sectors could contribute to a future leadership crisis across the creative industries.

2. CIPD, UK companies abandon EDI initiatives, November 2025

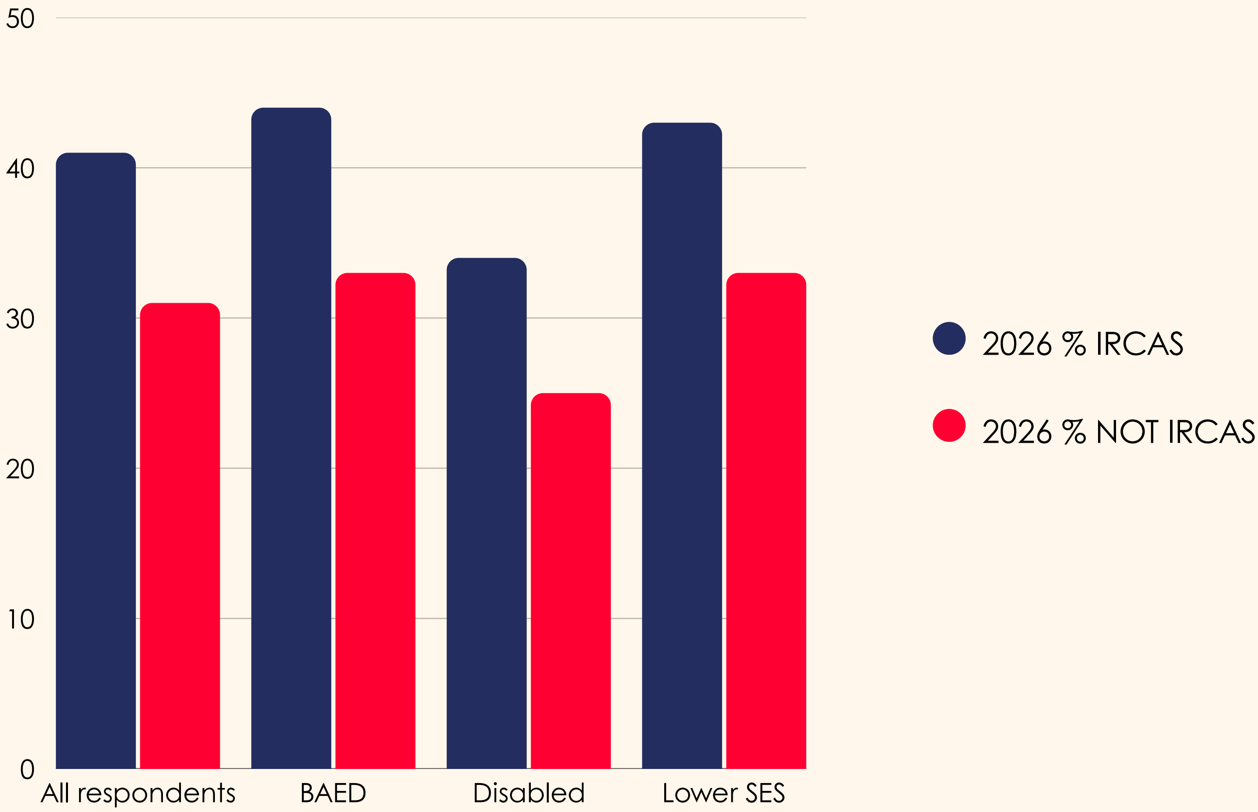
Is it what, or who, you know?

In the creative industries, access to networks and professional contacts remains a vital factor in career progression. Yet for many from under-represented backgrounds, these opportunities are not equally available.

The class ceiling in the creative industries,[3] a report by CA and FleishmanHillard UK, found that only **14%** of working-class respondents believed opportunities for social mobility were equally accessible, while **73%** of respondents believed class-based discrimination exists within the creative economy.

As financial pressures continue to rise and competition within the job market intensifies amidst declining career opportunities, the importance of professional networks is becoming even more stark.

% of respondents that agree or strongly agree they have access to the necessary contacts and networks to progress their career



3. Creative Access & FleishmanHillard, The class ceiling in the creative industries, April 2024

Over **two-thirds** of individuals IRCAS said our support was significant in helping develop their networks. From testimonials, it is clear CA's career development and mentoring programmes play a major role in connecting talent and expanding connections.

> **Creative Access gave me my start** and I have always felt very grateful and like if I reached out or needed it they would be there to **support me.** I've met some **great people at mixers** and **learnt a lot** from industry chats.
>
> Mid-level Creative Access alumni working in film & TV sector

D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent: A case study

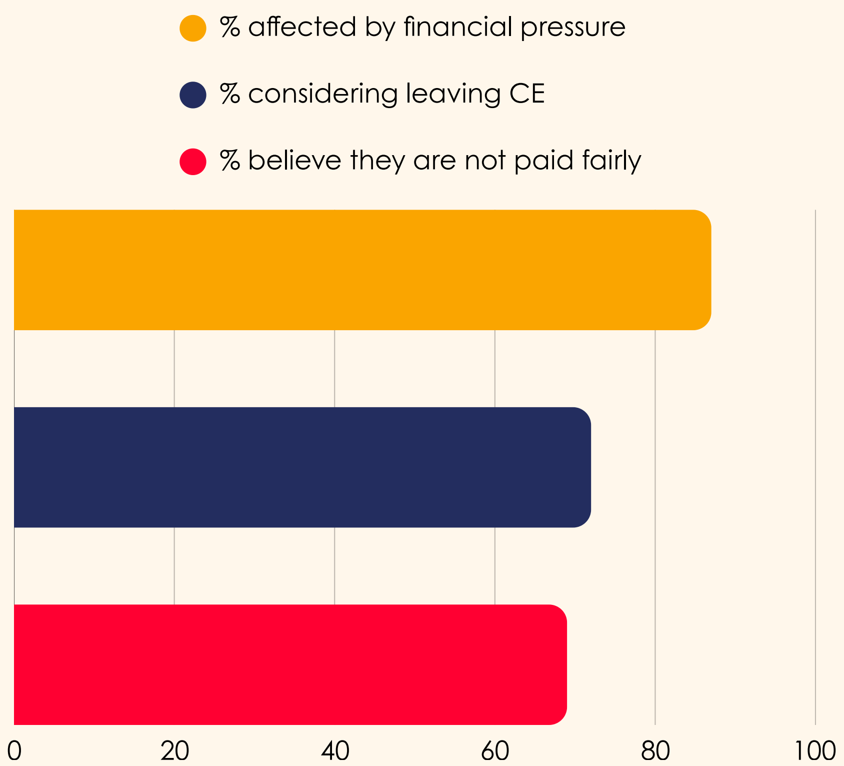
According to Scope, 72% of disabled people have experienced negative attitudes in the last 5 years.[4] These challenges are reflected in our Thrive findings: only **31%** of disabled respondents felt they were paid fairly for their role, while **87%** agreed financial pressures are affecting their ability to stay in the creative industries.

Disabled creatives have consistently reported low rates of confidence, access to contacts and networks, skills, knowledge and career optimism since 2022. While **65%** of disabled talent IRCAS agreed they had the knowledge and skills needed to progress, those without CA support hit an all-time low – with just **37%** agreeing, compared to **66%** in 2025.

Alongside this, disabled respondents were the largest majority to name financial factors as the most significant barrier to career progression, and the highest risk group to consider leaving the sector **(72%)**.

The findings from this year show those IRCAS were **10%** more likely to be optimistic about career progression. Only **a quarter** of disabled respondents without CA support agreed they were optimistic – a **14%** drop from 2025.

% of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent reporting financial pressures



4. Scope, Attitudes research, 2022

Whilst I have built a **strong foundation of skills** and understanding working in the film & TV industry, **I don't see a path to progression** due to continued barriers to work for disabled people and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. **I am currently looking to switch careers** because of these barriers.

Production assistant working in film & TV sector, Creative Access alumni

Disabled people make up **20% of the creative workforce**,[5] yet only **7.7% hold senior leadership positions**.[6] Unfortunately, this reflects a broader picture of unequal distribution of under-represented talent holding senior positions across the creative economy. Through training programmes and vital partnerships with employers across the sector, we are working to create more inclusive workspaces that boost career optimism, strengthen retention and nurture the next generation of creative industry leaders. But we cannot stop there. Creative organisations must strive to build a more representative workforce across all levels, or risk losing skilled and engaged talent to non-creative sectors.

5. Creative UK, Leadership diversity in the cultural & creative industries, September 2025
6. Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, UK arts, culture and heritage audiences + workforce, May 2024

The freelance experience

The freelance creatives we surveyed provided a mixed picture of opportunity and uncertainty. While some reported steady growth in work, others saw projects and budgets decline.

Too often, access to work is heavily reliant on personal networks, leaving many balancing multiple jobs or facing periods without income. Rising costs, a lack of freelance opportunities and the growing use of AI are adding further strain to freelancers, who make up the backbone of the UK's creative economy.[7]

> I would say my freelancing work provides me with an excellent supplemental income but **does not suffice on its own to make ends meet.**
>
> Freelancer working in publishing, Creative Access alumni

While there has been progress in improving access for under-represented talent, it is clear that more needs to be done. The sector must take greater responsibility for improving transparency around rates, clarifying commissioning processes to make them more accessible, and investing in skills development to create a more sustainable freelance ecosystem.

> Creative Access's masterclasses and mixers are a **good way to find connections** and **expand networks.**
>
> Freelancer working in branding, Creative Access alumni

7. Bectu, Freelancers: The backbone of the creative industries, September 2025

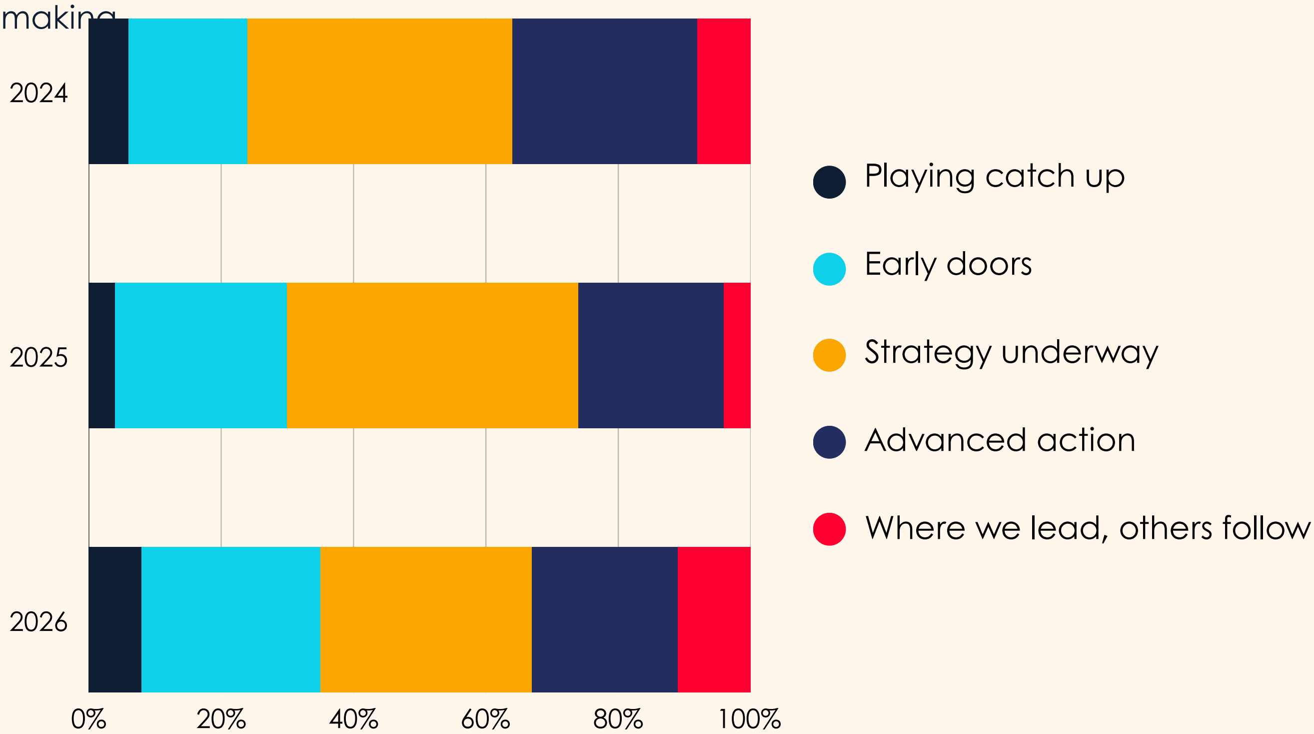
Employer snapshot:
DE&I progress in an uncertain climate

The past year has seen DE&I come under increasing pressure both in the UK and internationally. Several large corporations have scaled back their investment in DE&I programmes, while conversations around workplace diversity continue to shape public and political discourse.

Closer to home, employers are navigating an increasingly complex policy, legal and public environment around DE&I. Proposed changes to equality legislation[1] and legal challenges to programmes such as 10,000 Black Interns[2] have created greater uncertainty for organisations seeking to deliver inclusive recruitment and progression practices. Although many employers remain committed to inclusion, this year's findings suggest investment in training and supporting infrastructure is beginning to plateau.

Workplace diversity in focus

Despite challenging external factors, DE&I remains firmly on the agenda for many employers. The number of organisations positioning themselves at the forefront of DE&I practice has risen sharply, reaching almost **three times** its previous level. Large organisations are transferring this commitment into tangible outcomes, as nearly half of employers reported producing more authentic and diverse creative work, up from **27%** in 2025. Many employers also described a deliberate shift from standalone initiatives towards embedding DE&I goals within everyday decision-making.



1. Disability News Service, February 2026
2. The Guardian, April 2026

> We have consistently ensured staff are offered **fair opportunities for progression and rewards.**

CEO of a photography organisation

However, progress is far from universal. While **43%** of employers reported a more representative workforce over the past year, **12%** said it had dipped, highlighting that progress is not guaranteed across the sector. This unequal balance is also seen across organisational size. Over the last five years, our findings show a sharp decline of representation within SMEs. However, organisations of this size were more likely to see an increase in diverse talent this year **(49%)** compared to larger organisations.

Alongside this, **15%** said their organisation had become more equitable in the last 12 months, with publishing reporting some of the strongest outcomes on equity and PR continuing to lead on workforce representation **(60%)**. Nevertheless, we have seen DE&I efforts remain concentrated at entry level **(54%)**, despite almost half of employers recognising the need to support inclusion across the whole employee lifecycle.

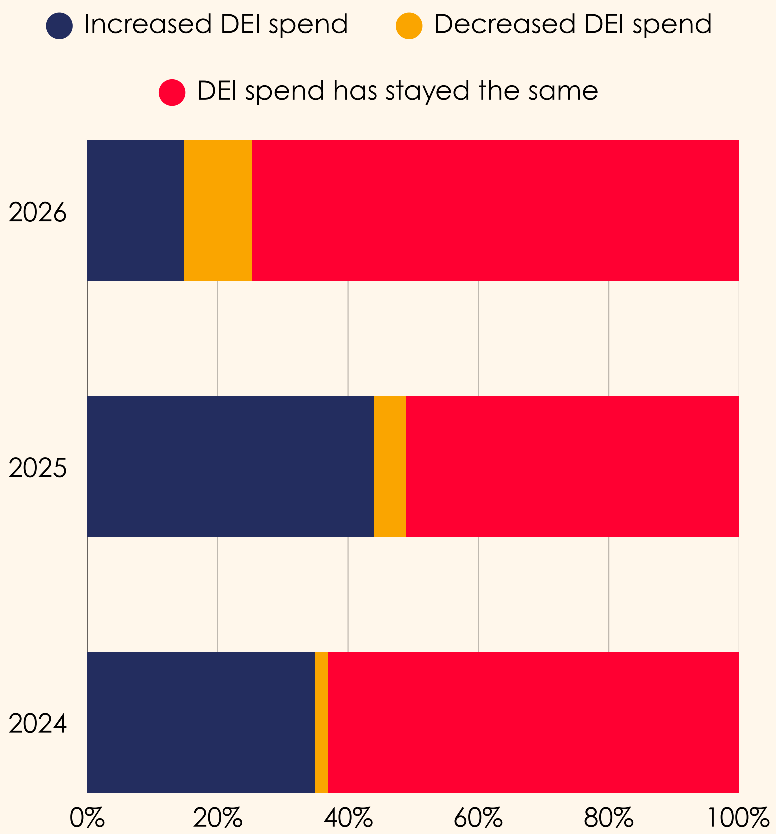
Sector	Employers more representative %	More equity in progression & reward %	More authentic creative output %
Publishing	37	25	31
Film, TV & radio	50	15	43
Music, theatre, dance & visual arts	53	14	53
PR	60	20	40

The investment gap

Three quarters of employers reported maintaining existing levels of DE&I spend, while only **15%** increased their investment, a significant decline from **44%** in 2025 and **35%** in 2024.

The proportion of organisations reducing DE&I spend has also increased from **2%** in 2024, **5%** in 2025 to **10%** in this year. While most employers remain committed to DE&I, our findings suggest fewer are investing additional resources to accelerate progress. These trends coincide with rising employment costs and growing recruitment pressures across the UK labour market. New YouGov research commissioned by Employment Hero,[3] shows an increase of **9.6%** to hiring costs over the past year, with SMEs reporting increasing caution around hiring.

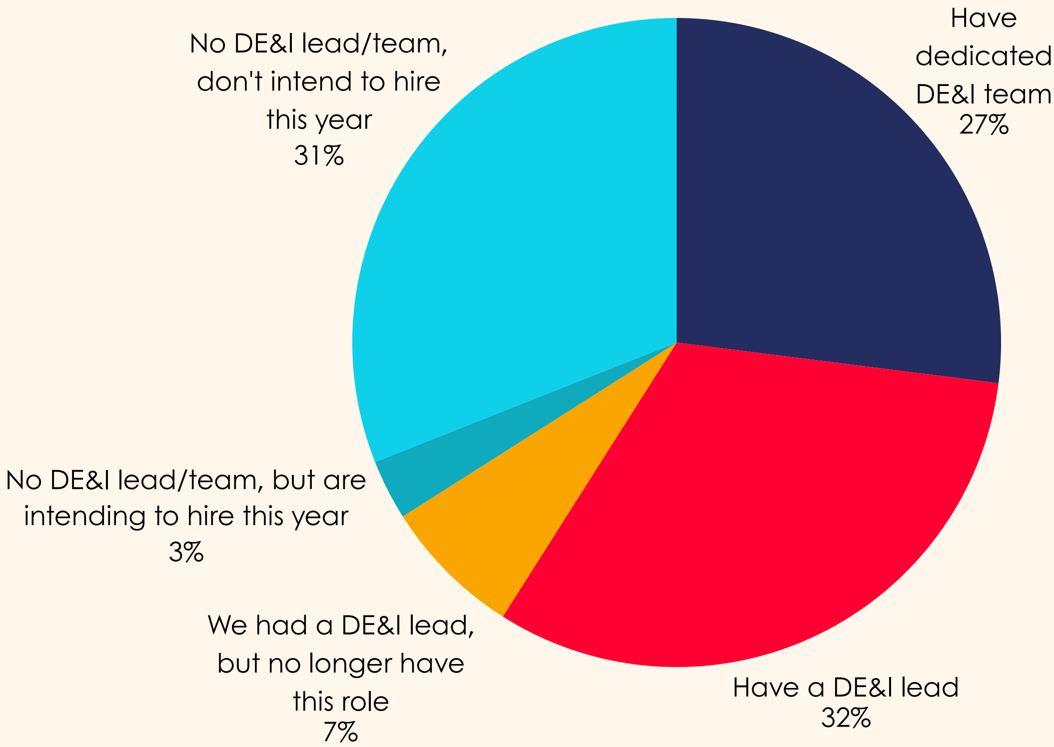
% DE&I spend within organisations



This trend is reflected in wider organisational infrastructure. More than **two in five** employers lack a dedicated DE&I lead, **39%** have no DE&I strategy in place and more than **one third** provide no DE&I training. Organisations with 250 or more FTE employees are more likely to have these structures in place than SMEs, making them better positioned to sustain long-term DE&I efforts.

3. New YouGov and Employment Hero research, May 2026

% of organisations with a dedicated DE&I team or lead



As progress begins to plateau, the gap between organisations with dedicated DE&I infrastructure, compared to those without, becomes increasingly important in determining whether workplace commitments to inclusivity can be sustained.

> “We have become more representative with progress made in the **senior leader population.** However **socio-economic representation remains a persistent issue** and our data has actually gone backwards in this area.”
>
> Organisational development and inclusion partner at a publishing company

Inclusion in the age of AI

Generative AI (Gen AI) is moving rapidly from experimentation to implementation across the creative industries. In 2025, just over half of employers told us they were using AI in their workflows. This year, that figure has risen to **75%**, suggesting AI is becoming an established part of how many creative organisations operate.

But while AI adoption is accelerating, the support needed to ensure people can use it confidently and equitably is failing to keep pace. Across both individuals and employers, unequal access to training is widening skills gaps and raising important questions about who will benefit from AI, and who risks being left behind.

AI in practice

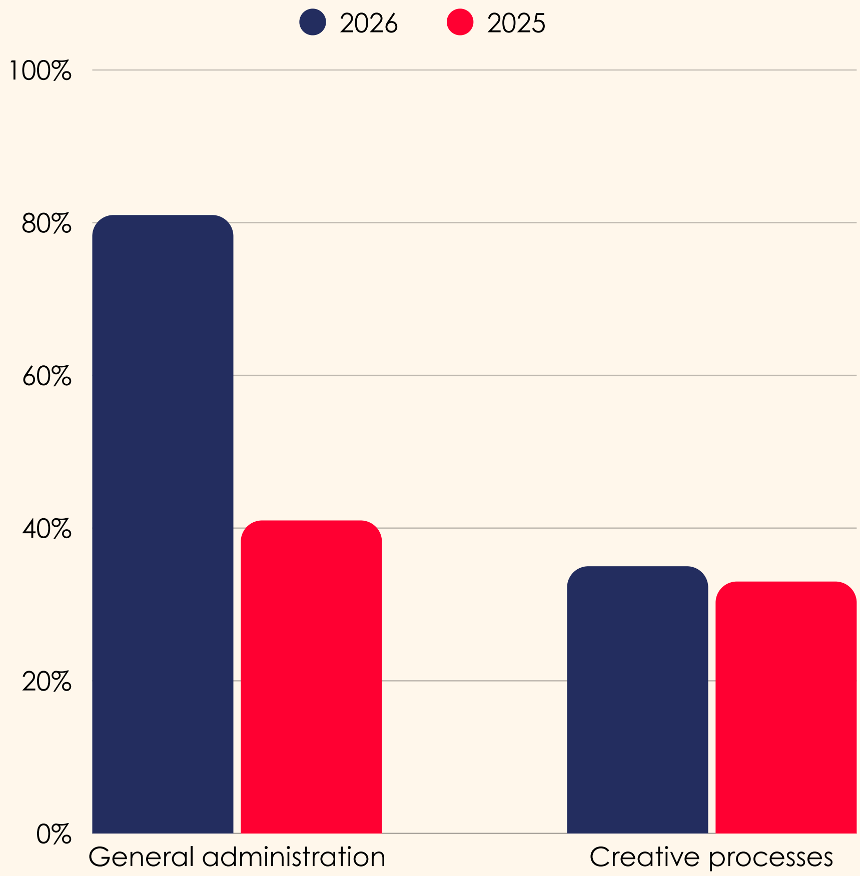
Respondents were most likely to report using Gen AI for general administration **(81%)**, followed by research **(51%)** and creative work **(35%)**. Compared with last year, the most notable shift is the growth in administrative use, where the figure has almost doubled **(41% in 2025)**. Meanwhile, use of AI in creative processes such as design and ideation has remained stable, suggesting organisations currently find the greatest productivity in operational support, rather than creative ideation and generation.

Organisations with 50-249 FTE employees reported the broadest use of AI across administration **(87%)** and research **(57%)**. Smaller companies outlined lower levels of use across most functions, particularly creative processes **(30%)** and strategy **(12%)**. This pattern is also reflected across various parts of the creative industries. PR, marketing and advertising reported the most extensive AI usage: **100%** for administration and **80%** for research.

While admin tasks remain the dominant use case overall, AI is increasingly being incorporated into creative workflows, most significantly in film, TV, radio and audio production **(42%)** and PR, marketing and advertising **(40%)**. In contrast, publishing reported the lowest use **(6%)**, reflecting ongoing concerns around copyright and authorship.[1]

1. The Bookseller, February 2026

% AI use case within organisations



Closing the capability gap

Despite this increased uptake, over **7 in 10** reported to receiving no AI training at all. As AI becomes increasingly embedded into workflows across the creative economy, the gap between adoption and capability risks creating and entrenching new and pre-existing barriers to participation and progression.

Confidence in using AI remains mixed. While **53%** of individuals reported feeling somewhat or very confident using AI, confidence dipped amongst D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent respondents **(40%)**, suggesting unequal access to support and training is reproducing existing inequalities across the sector.

Our findings show that access to learning opportunities is vital in helping creative professionals build confidence alongside AI adoption. This is reflected in responses from attendees of Creative Access' Inclusive AI open workshop, which explores practical applications of AI and wider considerations around representation. Among attendees, **100%** agreed that the session improved their awareness and understanding of AI.

> As a neurodivergent woman moving into senior roles, **AI has helped me to come to the point quicker** and be part of more conversations. It has helped **scale my leadership**, and I want to expand my knowledge further.
>
> Senior professional, Creative Access Inclusive AI open workshop attendee

Innovation and accountability

Alongside questions around capability and access, an alarming **83%** of employers reported concerns about the ethical and inclusion implications of AI, broadly unchanged from last year **(82%)**.

Recurring concerns around ownership and intellectual property emerged as a key theme from the respondents. In a recent report, the UK Parliament's Communications and Digital Committee[2] warned that the widespread use of copyrighted material to train AI models poses a challenge for the creative industries. Reflecting these issues, the UK Government has announced plans to establish a working group to explore support for independent and SMEs to license their content.

As AI adoption accelerates, the creative economy must take responsibility for ensuring these sector-shaping technologies expand access to opportunities rather than deepen existing inequalities. Training, building confidence, and implementing safeguards against bias are central to achieving this.

2. UK Parliament (Communications and Digital Committee), 'AI, copyright and the creative industries', March 2026

We know that **women, ethnic minorities, and disabled workers** are **disproportionately represented** in the lower-paid, junior positions **most vulnerable to AI displacement**. We must ensure that AI training and access aren't just perks for senior leadership but are **intentionally embedded at the entry level**.

DE&I coach at a media production company

The creative economy and its barriers

Are people being paid fairly to stay in the creative industries?

This year's Thrive survey revealed financial insecurity is the greatest threat to the creative economy. Rising living costs, insecure employment and concerns about fair pay are placing increasing pressure on creative professionals at every career stage.

While nearly **one third** of respondents believe they are not paid fairly, almost **two thirds** have considered leaving the creative industries altogether. This pressure is most strongly felt in the music, theatre, dance and visual arts sector, where only **1 in 5** agreed they were fairly compensated for their role.

Among respondents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, **83%** reported experiencing financial pressure within the last 12 months, while **67%** said they had considered leaving the creative industries altogether.

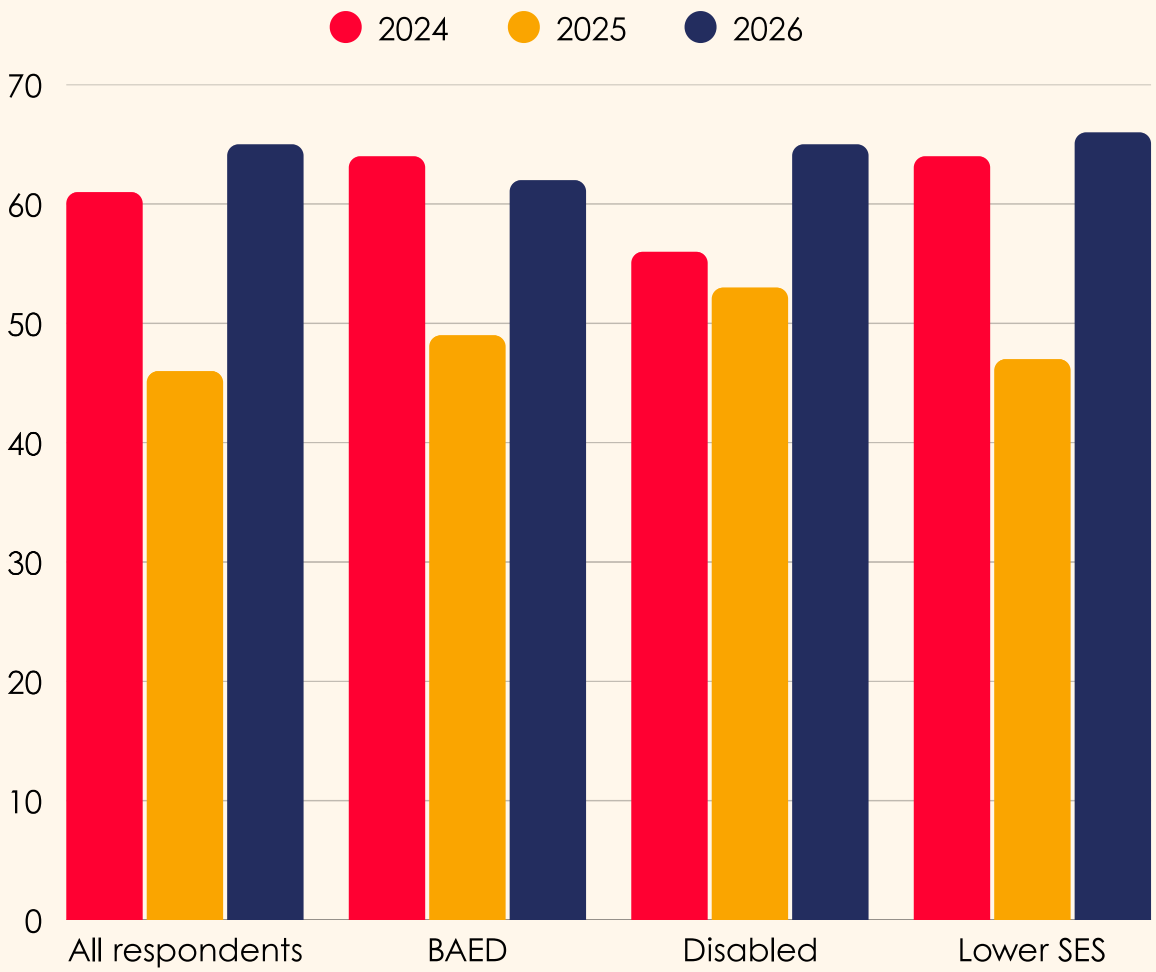
For creatives outside of London, this was even further pronounced, with **20%** identifying the location of opportunities as a significant barrier to progression.

> With my **workload**, current **projects**, and **my disability**, travelling to London can be difficult. **I would love to see more opportunities outside of London**, particularly to support networking and to showcase creative industries beyond the capital.
>
> Learning & participation officer working in theatre, Creative Access alumni

In light of this, the question facing the creative industries in 2026 is no longer simply how to attract talent, but how to retain it.

Positively, **65%** of respondents receiving CA support report positive career progress, depicting a rise for the first time since 2022. BAED and lower SES talent were around **10%** more likely to benefit from our services.

% in receipt of CA services reporting career progress in the last 3 years



There are also encouraging signs that career progression is improving across the sector. Individuals working in PR, marketing and communications were most likely to report progress **(73%)**, while film, TV and radio saw the strongest gains. **70%** agreed they had experienced positive career progress in the last 12 months – a huge bounce back of **25%**. Over half the respondents working in publishing had progressed, a **10%** increase year on year. Meanwhile, progression across music, theatre, dance and visual arts almost doubled, as respondents reported one of the most significant increases since 2025.

% of individuals reporting career progression by sector

Sector	2024 %	2025 %	2026 %
Film, TV & radio	46	45	70
Books, publishing & journalism	51	47	57
Music, theatre, dance & visual arts	63	35	63
PR, marketing & advertising	62	54	73

The progression picture

Although almost half of our respondents agreed financial barriers were affecting professional growth, they were just as likely to attribute the stagnation to a lack of space to progress within their organisation. Our findings suggest employers are struggling to effectively support or nurture the burgeoning pool of mid-level creative talent.

While nearly half of mid-level individuals received a pay rise, only **22%** received a promotion in the last 12 months – despite being more likely than any other group to have gained additional responsibility during the same period. Trends suggest the duties and expectations associated with mid-level roles are surging. However, individuals are not officially advancing in their careers through promotion or title recognition.

It's quite difficult to progress within creative roles due to a **lack of diversity** within leadership and development resources, and **the industry is quite unstable** with frequent redundancies and layoffs.

Audience editor working in journalism,
Creative Access alumni

The leadership challenge

The UK creative industries are worth an estimated **£145.8 billion** per year and make up **5.5%** of the Gross Value Added (GVA) to the economy.[1] However, our findings show **65%** of respondents are considering leaving the sector for other, non-creative industries. This paints a worrying picture. As the creative economy welcomes renewed nationwide investment from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), strong leadership and robust succession planning is vital – perhaps now more than ever.

According to research by Creative UK, people from under-represented backgrounds are not fairly or equally represented at the leadership level in the creative industries. The economic and creative benefits of diverse workforces[2] have been clearly documented, meaning retaining under-represented talent is equally as important as attracting it.

If left unaddressed, the issue of retention and progression could expose the sector to an era of lost leadership: where experienced, senior under-represented talent offering the rich, diverse perspectives essential to driving innovation, creativity and economic growth, have already moved on.

Building a more sustainable creative economy

While the challenges facing the sector are significant, they can be overcome. Organisations and employers across the UK's creative industries are taking steps to address the financial barriers preventing under-represented talent from accessing, progressing and retaining creative careers.

CA continues to advocate for fair pay and greater salary transparency through partnerships with organisations, such as the Living Wage Foundation and We Show the Salary. We work with employers to champion Real Living Wage pay and salary transparency, helping to create more equitable pathways into the creative industries.

Through partnerships such as the Mo Siewcharran and David Tebbutt Trust Funds, we're helping to open up entry-level opportunities for under-represented talent across sectors and regions, while supporting SMEs to recruit more inclusively. Looking ahead, we're proud to be part of a DCMS-funded consortium expanding access to creative careers for young people through internships, placements, employability sessions and career development support. Tackling financial barriers and creating equitable pathways into employment through initiatives like these are key to building a more inclusive, representative and sustainable creative economy.

1. Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 'DCMS Sectors Economic Estimates Gross Value Added 2024', February 2026
2. Shaw Trust, 'The benefits of a diverse workforce and inclusive hiring practices', August 2025

“Through the **job postings, articles, and industry insights shared on Instagram**, I’ve been able to better understand the creative industries as a whole, the **types of roles available** and the expectations within them. [Creative Access] has helped me **stay aware of opportunities** and trends at a time when it has been difficult to secure work. Having **access to the platform** has helped me feel **less disconnected** from the industry during unemployment.”

Mid-level PR, marketing & advertising professional

Our impact

This report points to a clear divide between those navigating the creative economy with support and those without it.

From inclusive recruitment and mentorship to career development and progression support, IRCAS (in receipt of Creative Access services) respondents consistently reported stronger outcomes across progression, confidence, optimism and access to networks.

Our findings reinforce the role sustained support plays in improving long-term retention for creative talent.

Individuals

85% said CA made a **significant or very significant impact on their career progress**

73% have the **knowledge and skills** needed to progress their careers

65% made **career progress**, compared to just **48%** of those without support

55% report **progression on DE&I** in their organisation, compared to **36%** from those that have not received CA services

> As I transitioned from university into the world of work, I had **access to a mentor through Creative Access.** He helped me **expand my knowledge and network** and gave me the **confidence** to apply to lots of **opportunities.**
>
> TV runner,
> Creative Access alumni

For D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent, the difference is stark: **65%** IRCAS feel equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to progress, compared with **37%** NIRCAS.

The benefits of our support is evident through tangible career outcomes. Those IRCAS were more likely to report receiving a pay rise and promotion in the last 12 months. They were also more likely to expand their professional networks, demonstrating how targeted support can help unlock new connections and opportunities for career progression.

BAED and lower SES individuals also saw some of the strongest improvements in confidence and career optimism, reaching their highest levels in 4 years. This momentum is further reflected across sectors, particularly in TV, film and radio, where progression has risen to **38%**, marking the largest increase seen in the last 2 years, while PR, marketing and advertising professionals express the greatest levels of optimism overall at **43%**.

Creative Access helped me secure my first role. They helped me **gain confidence** working in the creative industries and understand how to manage my own creative career.

TV production assistant,
Creative Access alumni

I probably **wouldn't be in publishing if it weren't for the Creative Access** traineeship, since there are so few publishing jobs up here [Scotland].

Marketing assistant working in publishing,
Creative Access alumni

Employers

The employers we work with also express positive outcomes. Through recruitment, mentoring, training and consultancy services, CA supports partners to build more inclusive workplaces and creative cultures. Organisations that have engaged with these services consistently report greater progress on representation, equity and inclusion compared to those who have not.

100% of organisations identifying as **DE&I leaders** have used CA services

94% of organisations reporting a **more representative workforce** have used CA services

92% of organisations that have a **DE&I lead** have used CA services

91% of organisations reporting **more diverse and authentic creative output** have used CA services, with **53%** of these accessing our **inclusive recruitment services**

> “We have worked with Creative Access to **recruit a trainee.** We are working with a school from an area of **high economic deprivation to provide work experience opportunities.**”
>
> CEO of a publishing organisation

Conclusion

Our 2026 Thrive report illustrates a sector striving to progress against a backdrop of mounting external and internal pressures. Individuals across the creative industries are experiencing declining confidence and optimism about their future in the sector. Creative professionals from under-represented backgrounds are experiencing these pressures most acutely, with many – particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and disabled people – considering leaving the industry altogether due to financial strain and limited opportunities to progress.

Three-quarters of employers now use AI in their workflows, suggesting 'Gen AI' has moved from experimentation to implementation stages for many creative workplaces. As the question shifts from who is using AI to who is being left behind, organisations must now proactively prioritise training and equitable support to prevent social and structural inequalities from becoming further entrenched in the creative sector.

However, the benefits of long-term commitment to DE&I initiatives that welcome, develop and nurture under-represented talent are compounding – with nearly half of employers producing more authentic, impactful creative work because of their diverse workforce. While investment slows, and business costs rise alongside political and policy challenges, employers working with us continue to be more likely to recruit and retain more representative workforces.

The creative industries are on the brink of a major financial boost. To ensure investment reaches the widest possible pool of talent, initiatives such as the refreshed Discover Creative Careers programe will play an important role in widening access to opportunities. Delivered through a national consortium of education, creative industry and access organisations, the programme will help young people explore opportunities across the creative industries, with a particular focus on widening access for under-represented groups and regions.

At this critical juncture, retaining under-represented talent is equally important as opening up career access. The sector risks losing its future leaders and deepening its skills and talent gaps. Experienced creative professionals with highly valuable skills and years of training are being siphoned off into other industries. That means tackling barriers to progression, and preventing a further drain of talent, is more important now than ever.

We remain steadfastly committed to delivering practical and impactful employability and career development programmes alongside our incredible community of diverse creative talent, alumni and employer partners who share our commitment to building a creative economy that truly reflects UK society.

Employer recommendations

1 Mental health, wellbeing support and psychological safety

This year's findings show that financial pressure, uncertainty and workplace challenges continue to affect employee wellbeing. Nearly half of respondents said their role had negatively impacted their mental health.

Here are some simple steps employers can take to better support their teams:

Mental health support

- Train Mental Health First Aiders and provide clear guidelines, resources and signposting to ensure staff know where to access support

Wellness Action Plans

- Implement Wellness Action Plans to encourage conversations about wellbeing and workplace adjustments

Build psychological safety

- Begin tackling unconscious bias in the workplace through Creative Access training to help create environments where people feel comfortable raising concerns, asking questions and seeking support

2 Address recruitment barriers to widen industry access

Salary transparency

- List your role on our Opportunities Board, where we will optimise the listing for accessibility and clearly display the role's salary or salary band, and support the We Show the Salary campaign

Pay the Real Living Wage

- Ensure internships and entry-level roles are paid at or above the Real Living Wage, as set by the Living Wage Foundation

Recruit inclusively through Creative Access

- Commit to an inclusive recruitment strategy, with budget and processes to widen engagement, ensuring that any new vacancies are reaching candidates who may not already have contact with your organisation
- Attend expert-led training sessions on inclusive recruitment processes to ensure inclusivity is built into every stage of the hiring pipeline

Recruit beyond existing networks

- Partner with Creative Access to reach untapped networks through masterclasses, talent pooling and industry mixer events. Read more on our work with Which? here

Build talent pipelines beyond London

- Actively engage talent from the nation and regions by connecting with Creative Access's diverse talent pools across the UK. Get in touch to discuss recruitment and outreach options
- Build accessibility into the hiring process and roles' working patterns; consider hybrid, remote and flexible working arrangements where possible

3 Focus on retention, not just recruitment

The challenge facing the creative industries goes beyond attracting diverse talent to retaining it. Professionals who accessed Creative Access services reported higher levels of confidence, optimism, skills and access to networks than those who had not.

Invest in career development, develop future leaders

- Create clear progression pathways and address barriers that may prevent under-represented talent from moving into senior roles
- Provide access to training, networking and professional development opportunities by enrolling mid-level talent on our Thrive career development programme

Provide mentoring opportunities

- Mentoring remains one of the most effective ways to support progression, confidence and career development. Creative Access has an impressive track record running highly successful mentoring programmes, including high-profile partnerships with Maya Jama, McLaren Racing, ITV, Penguin Random House and universities across the UK. Find out more about our mentoring programmes here

4 Actively commit to supporting under-represented talent

Train and upskill line managers

- D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent professionals continue to experience disproportionate barriers to progression and financial stability. Upskill line managers with expert-led training on embracing neurodiversity, inclusive leadership and effective line management. Get in touch to discuss bespoke training options

Review workplace culture

- Conducting culture surveys can be a useful way to understand how employees are feeling about the current workplace climate. The key to a good survey is forming an action plan from the findings, sharing results and actions with the team and making sure these are followed up on

5 Adopt AI equitably

Rates of AI adoption rose rapidly this year without equitable access to training and support. Employers and organisations choosing to embed AI into their processes should prioritise placing inclusivity at the heart of these efforts to prevent staff feeling "left behind" or lacking confidence, and avoid replicating inequalities across the sector.

Train and upskill staff

- Organise and attend staff training and support on how to use AI inclusively through our open workshops

6 Future-proof your pipeline now

Creating inclusive workplaces requires intention paired with education and action.

Read

- Explore our resources on topics including mental health, disability inclusion and supporting the trans community in the workplace

Leadership

- Sponsor talent from under-represented groups on our Thrive programme and use our services to recruit senior level talent and NEDs to keep the pipeline moving, and talent from under-represented groups getting access to the senior, decision-making roles, where there may be a current lack of visible, meaningful role models

Training

- Complete training around neurodiversity, unconscious bias, microaggressions and allyship in the workplace

> "Thanks to the **Creative Access x Mo Siewcharran Fund we have recruited a trainee from an under-represented background** to support with training in the coming months. We also hired one of the other prospective candidates on a freelance basis. We are always looking to make future **recruiting as accessible as possible.**"
>
> Communications coordinator working for a non-profit organisation

Individual recommendations

How do you get your organisation to better support your professional development?

Ask your employer to support you via one of our career development programmes whether you're just starting out in your career, or you've progressed to mid or senior level status. Read our advice, or get in touch with us at info@creativeaccess.org.uk to request a template for making your case.

How can you access our opportunities?

Sign up to our jobs and opportunities board for entry to mid and senior-level roles. You'll be the first to hear about the best new live roles and opportunities in the creative industries, plus bursary application launch timings, free masterclasses & networking events.

Useful organisations for support, career advice, development and networks:

- Access to Work
- Action for Freelancers
- BECTU
- CIPR
- Common People
- Creative Diversity Network
- Creative Mentor Network
- Creative Lives In Progress
- Creative UK
- Equity
- Film & TV Charity
- Help Musicians
- I Like Networking
- JournoResources
- Mama Youth
- Museum as Muck
- People Like Us
- ScreenSkills
- Scope
- The 93% Club
- The Publishers Association
- UK Black Comms Network
- UK Music
- We Are Black Journos
- WorkWise for Screen

Glossary

AI: Artificial Intelligence

BAED: Black, Asian and ethnically diverse

CA: Creative Access

CA services: Creative Access development programmes e.g. recruited into an internship or role, Springboard entry-level programme, Thrive mid-level programme, CA mentoring programme

DCMS: UK Government Department of Culture, Media and Sport

D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent: Throughout this report we use this term to recognise the diversity of people who experience disability, neurodivergence, deafness or are culturally Deaf. We recognise that individuals choose different ways to describe themselves and respect those preferences.

DE&I: Diversity, equity and inclusion

FTE: Full-time equivalent employee – a unit of measurement to indicate the workload of an employed person

GenAI: Generative AI - a category of AI models that can create new content, including text, images, audio, video, and code, based on learned patterns from existing data, such as ChatGPT

Gross Value Added (GVA): the value that producers have added to the goods and services they have bought

IRCAS: In receipt of Creative Access services

Lower SES: Lower socioeconomic background

NIRCAS: Not in receipt of Creative Access services

NEET: Not in employment, education or training

Glossary (cont.)

People with the characteristic of gender reassignment: The Equality Act 2010 uses the legal term "gender reassignment" as a protected characteristic. This protection is not limited to people who have undergone medical treatment or surgery, and may apply to anyone proposing to undergo, undergoing or who has undergone a process of changing their gender. Creative Access recognises that individuals may choose to describe their gender identity differently, and we respect those preferences.

SME: Small and medium-sized enterprise

Under-represented [groups]: Individuals from groups that are under-represented in the creative industries. This includes, but is not limited to, individuals who identify as Black, Asian, or from other ethnically diverse backgrounds, disabled people, people with the characteristic of gender reassignment, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, carers and asylum seekers.

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Introduction

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CREATIVE ACCESS

About Creative Access:

As an independent non-profit, Creative Access' mission is simple: to see the UK's creative economy reflect the society it serves. We are the UK's leading inclusivity organisation in the creative industries. Since 2012, we have been driving change across the sector by creating pathways for under-represented groups and helping organisations build more inclusive cultures.

Working across publishing, media, TV, film, theatre, music and the wider creative economy, we deliver recruitment, mentoring, training, consultancy and career development programmes. Our work supports individuals at every stage of their careers and helps organisations attract and retain diverse talent.

Creative Access is a trusted voice on representation in the creative industries, producing research which champions equitable opportunities and informs industry action.

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