WHY DATA MATTERS

Towards a data observatory for the visual arts: A scoping study to identify sector data needs

Contemporary
Visual Arts
Network **England**

Executive Summary: Why Data Matters

The UK visual arts sector generates significant economic, cultural, social and civic value. It contributes to employment, international trade, education, health and wellbeing, placemaking, community cohesion and the creative economy. Yet despite this broad contribution, the sector remains only partially visible within policy and funding frameworks. Evidence exists in abundance, but it is fragmented across organisations, regions and disciplines, making it difficult to aggregate, compare and translate into forms that influence decision-making.

This scoping study explores the feasibility of establishing a Visual Arts Data Observatory for the UK. Drawing on stakeholder interviews, documentary analysis, existing datasets and consultation with sector organisations, the research finds that the principal challenge is not one of data scarcity, but of uneven visibility and usability. Different organisations collect valuable information for different purposes, yet there is currently no shared infrastructure that connects these datasets to create a coherent national picture of the visual arts ecosystem.

The study identifies a structural asymmetry within the current evidence landscape. Economic and market data, including commercial sales, trade and employment figures, are comparatively well developed and readily recognised within government and policy contexts. By contrast, evidence on artists' livelihoods, freelance and portfolio careers, grassroots activity, studio infrastructure, creative health, the economic and social impact of galleries, and place-based value remain fragmented and inconsistently captured. As a result, some of the most important aspects of the visual arts sector are also the least visible.

The report argues that a Visual Arts Data Observatory should be conceived not as a new data-collection exercise but as a coordinating infrastructure. Its primary purpose should be to aggregate, standardise and translate existing evidence, enabling data held by galleries, studios, artists, regional networks, sector bodies, universities, funders and public agencies to become cumulative and policy-relevant. In doing so, it would reduce duplication, address survey fatigue and increase the value of data already being collected across the sector.

Seven recommendations emerge from the research. These can be grouped into three strategic priorities:

Building the infrastructure

- Establish the Observatory as a coordinating and aggregating infrastructure.
- Develop a shared minimum data framework to improve comparability across datasets.
- Support the implementation of revised SIC and SOC classifications to improve the visibility of the visual arts within official statistics.

Broadening the evidence base

- Strengthen the sector's economic evidence while ensuring that value is not reduced to economic metrics alone.
- Integrate qualitative, narrative and longitudinal evidence alongside quantitative data.

Making evidence usable

- Design accessible outputs around different user needs, including dashboards, clean datasets, policy briefings, benchmarking tools and case-study resources.
- Position narrative as a strategic function of the Observatory, ensuring that evidence can be translated into compelling accounts of the sector's value and contribution.

The study concludes that the visual arts sector faces a narrative challenge as much as a data challenge. While evidence exists across multiple organisations and datasets, it is rarely assembled into coherent stories that can shape public understanding or influence policy. A successful Observatory would therefore do more than store information: it would transform fragmented evidence into usable knowledge, support stronger advocacy, and provide the foundations for a more visible, better evidenced and more strategically positioned visual arts sector.

Ultimately, the proposed Visual Arts Data Observatory represents an opportunity to create the shared evidence infrastructure that the sector currently lacks. By connecting existing data, establishing common standards, supporting policy translation and enabling evidence-led narratives, it would strengthen the sector's ability to demonstrate its full value and ensure that the visual arts are better understood within national, regional and local decision-making.

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Towards a data observatory for the visual arts: A scoping study to identify sector data needs

Summary of Recommendations

This report finds that the visual arts sector does not simply lack data. Rather, it suffers from a fragmented evidence landscape in which different forms of value are unevenly captured, inconsistently standardised, and not always translated into forms that influence policy. The proposed Visual Arts Data Observatory should therefore be designed not only as a data resource, but as an infrastructure for aggregation, interpretation, policy translation and narrative change.

Recommendation 1: Establish the observatory as a coordinating infrastructure

The observatory should not primarily be conceived as a new centralised data-producing body. Its first function should be to coordinate, connect and make usable the data that already exists across the sector. This includes data held by regional networks, public bodies, sector organisations, galleries, artist-facing platforms, art market bodies, funders, universities and research organisations.

Recommendation 2: Develop a shared minimum data framework

The observatory should create a shared minimum data framework for the visual arts. This would not require every organisation to collect identical data, but would establish a core set of common variables that allow datasets to be compared, aggregated and analysed over time. This would ensure that data-gathering efforts are not fragmented or duplicated, but instead contribute to a cumulative evidence base for the visual arts.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise Economic Legibility Without Reducing the Sector to It

Economic data remains essential. The sector needs to be able to speak clearly in terms of GVA, employment, exports, sales, business activity and wider economic contribution. However, the observatory must avoid reducing the value of the visual arts to economic metrics alone. It should develop an evidence framework capable of holding economic, social, cultural, educational, health and place-based value together.

Recommendation 4: Integrate qualitative and narrative evidence

The observatory should treat qualitative evidence as a core part of its infrastructure, not as supplementary illustration. Case studies, longitudinal accounts, participant testimony, practitioner reflection and place-based narratives are necessary for capturing precarity, invisible labour, social impact and long-term change. This evidence should be structured, searchable and linked where possible to quantitative indicators.

Recommendation 5: Address classification and visibility through SIC/SOC implementation

The observatory should support the sector to adopt and use relevant SIC and SOC codes correctly. This includes producing guidance, supporting organisations through classification decisions, and working with DCMS, ONS, Companies House and sector partners to monitor implementation. Effective classification reform would improve not only official statistics, but also the many secondary reports and analyses that depend on national datasets.

Recommendation 6: Design the observatory around tiered access and different user needs

The observatory should not assume a single user or a single output. It should provide different levels of access, including downloadable cleaned datasets for analysts, dashboards and structured insight tools for sector users, and accessible narrative outputs for advocacy and public communication. This would ensure that data is not merely technically available, but practically usable.

Recommendation 7: Address narrative as a strategic dimension

The observatory should not only produce data; it should support the construction of evidence-led narratives. The visual arts sector faces a narrative problem as much as a data problem. Evidence must therefore be organised around the political, social and policy contexts it seeks to influence. Whether that concerns creative health, social cohesion, education, place-making, artist livelihoods, international competitiveness or the art market. The observatory should help the sector understand what stories are currently being told about it, what evidence supports or challenges those stories, and how alternative accounts of value can be made credible.

Taken together, these recommendations position the observatory as an aggregating infrastructure as opposed to a data producing instrument. In other words, it's purpose should be to optimise the usefulness of existing data gathering strategies, allowing disconnected datasets to become cumulative and effective. By doing so, the observatory should transform dispersed evidence into usable knowledge. This requires aggregation, so that fragmented data becomes cumulative; standardisation, so that evidence can be compared; translation, so that it becomes policy-legible; and narrative, so that it can intervene in how the value of the visual arts is understood.

Introduction

The UK visual arts sector occupies a paradoxical position within the wider creative economy. On the one hand, it generates substantial economic value, contributing to employment, trade, and national competitiveness. On the other, it produces a range of social, cultural, and public benefits that extend far beyond economic metrics but remain only partially evidenced within policy frameworks. The problem addressed in this report is that the full value of the visual arts is systematically misrepresented within the forms of evidence which carry weight within decision-making contexts.

At the level of the art market, the sector is already highly visible. Data commissioned by the British Art Market Federation (BAMF) presents a robust and internationally comparable account of economic activity. These reports position the UK as a major global art market, functioning as an *entrepôt* marketplace within international trade networks. Recent figures indicate that UK art and antiques sales reached £10.5 billion in 2025, making it the second-largest global art market with a stable 18% share of global sales, and supporting tens of thousands of jobs supported directly and indirectly by the sector.[i]

However, much of this entrepôt activity reflects the scale of trade flows rather than value created domestically. This becomes apparent when contrasted with figures produced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which estimates the direct gross value added (GVA) of the art and antiques market at just £0.8 billion.[ii] Set against a total creative industries GVA of approximately £146 billion (5.5% of UK GVA), this suggests that, despite high levels of trade, the art market makes a relatively modest contribution to measured domestic productivity.[iii]

Yet these representations need probing and problematising at every turn: A growing body of analyses demonstrates that DCMS figures likely understate the scale of the sector due to structural limitations in industrial classification systems. [iv] In particular, major market actors—such as leading auction houses—are often registered under general service sector SIC codes, rendering significant portions of activity statistically invisible when isolating the visual arts. While reforms to classification frameworks are underway, their practical impact on the visibility of the sector has yet to be fully realised.[v]

Despite this demonstrable economic significance, the underlying conditions of artistic production reveal a markedly different picture. Recent empirical research commissioned by DACS, based on a survey of 1,241 UK-based visual artists, provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of artists' economic realities. It finds that the median annual income derived from self-employed artistic practice is approximately £12,500—over 60% lower than the UK median wage.

The study also shows that more than four-fifths of artists earn below the national median, and nearly two-thirds fall below the equivalent of a full-time minimum wage. Income instability is pervasive, with over 80% of respondents reporting that their earnings are "unstable" or "very unstable", and many relying on non-creative employment or household income to sustain their practice. These findings are not anomalous but reflect a longer-term trend: real-term median earnings for visual artists have declined by nearly 50% since 2010.[vi]

To depart from this tension between high levels of economic activity at the level of the market against a persistent precarity at the level of the artist, there is another crucial issue on how we understand the breadth of the visual arts and its value. While economic metrics capture certain dimensions of value—most notably trade, turnover, and contribution to GVA—they provide only a partial account of the sector's wider significance. A substantial

body of research, including work produced by the National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH), has demonstrated that engagement with the arts contributes to a range of outcomes that extend beyond the economic: improved health and wellbeing, strengthened social cohesion, enhanced educational attainment, and the cultivation of civic and cultural life. Similarly, visual arts organisations play a critical role in place-making, contributing to the vitality of local economies through increased footfall, audience engagement, and the activation of public space.

However, these broader forms of value are not absent in the form of easily remedied data gaps, yet they are unevenly evidenced. At the level of individual organisations, there exists a wealth of granular, practice-based data—ranging from audience demographics to postcode-level attendance and local engagement patterns. Yet such data is typically collected for internal evaluation or funder reporting purposes, and is rarely standardised, shared, or aggregated across the sector. As a result, the economic value of the arts market is rendered highly visible through coherent and internationally comparable datasets. But in comparison, social, cultural, and place-based contributions remain fragmented, episodic, and methodologically inconsistent. The consequence is not an absence of data, but a failure of translation: forms of value that are widely recognised within the sector remain insufficiently legible within the policy frameworks that shape funding, strategy, and public investment.

It is within this context that the proposal for a Visual Arts Data Observatory emerges. The challenge is not simply one of data scarcity, but of fragmentation, inconsistency, and misalignment between the forms of value produced by the sector and the frameworks through which that value is assessed. A data observatory offers a means of addressing these issues by aggregating existing data sources, standardising key variables, and enabling the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative evidence into coherent, policy-relevant narratives. Crucially, such an observatory would not seek to impose additional burdens of data collection on already stretched organisations, but rather to make more effective use of the data producing strategies that already exist.

In doing so, it would support a shift from episodic and organisation-specific evidence towards a cumulative, sector-wide understanding of value. This would enable patterns to emerge across otherwise disconnected datasets, strengthening the evidential basis for advocacy, policy development, and strategic planning. At the same time, by accommodating multiple forms of data and different user needs—from policymakers to practitioners—it would reflect the complexity of the sector itself.

The following report builds on this premise. Drawing on 15 stakeholder interviews and a short, targeted survey distributed through CVAN's regional networks, it sets out a series of recommendations for the development of a Visual Arts Data Observatory. Each recommendation is grounded in empirical evidence and seeks to address a specific dimension of the current data landscape, with the aim of enhancing the visibility, coherence, and impact of the visual arts sector within the UK.

From Fragmented Evidence to a Visual Arts Data Observatory

Across the stakeholder case reports, a consistent finding emerges: the visual arts sector is not lacking in data per se, but in the infrastructure required to aggregate, standardise, and mobilise that data effectively. Evidence exists in abundance, but remains dispersed across institutional boundaries, shaped by divergent methodologies, and oriented toward specific organisational purposes rather than collective understanding.

This condition is particularly visible in the contrast between different parts of the sector. At one end, organisations such as the British Art Market Federation (BAMF) are able to mobilise highly structured, policy-legible datasets—capturing turnover, employment, imports, exports, and international market share—allowing the art market to be readily positioned within economic policy frameworks. BAMF's use of commissioned reports, particularly those produced by Arts Economics, demonstrates how consistent methodologies and clear economic indicators enable effective policy engagement, especially in relation to taxation, trade, and regulatory frameworks.[vii]

By contrast, organisations working closer to artists' and art workers' lived conditions—such as CVAN and Artquest—produce rich and detailed insights into working practices, income diversification, and everyday realities. However, these datasets are typically fragmented across regions, methodologically inconsistent, and therefore difficult to aggregate at a national scale. In addition, their reliance on self-selected sampling strategies limits their capacity to support statistically robust or generalisable claims, reducing their influence in policy and decision-making contexts.

This results in a structural asymmetry within the visual arts evidence base. The most economically legible parts of the sector are the most visible in policy contexts, while areas such as freelance labour, grassroots activity, and socially embedded practice remain underrepresented. As articulated in the CVAN case, the sector is "rich in anecdotal evidence" yet "poor in proof," particularly in relation to economic and social impact. This sentiment was echoed across multiple CVAN regional stakeholder interviews. It is worth noting, however, that *artist and art worker surveys* have been conducted by several CVAN regions (for example, in the South West and Yorkshire/Humber), in some cases achieving substantial response rates.[viii] While these surveys attempt to address key evidence gaps, they are not consistently implemented across all regions and differ in methodology, limiting their comparability at a national level.[ix] With this in mind, the issue becomes not simply one of filling data gaps. It is one of transforming fragmented evidence into cumulative knowledge.

A visual arts data observatory offers a means of addressing this asymmetrical condition. As recent work on data observatories suggests, the challenge cannot be reduced to the absence of data, but on the contrary, the presence of large volumes of heterogeneous and often unstructured information—what has been described as a "big bang" of qualitative and informal data generated through surveys, consultations, and everyday interactions.[x] While such data offers valuable insight into the lived and felt experience of art work, it remains difficult to navigate, connect, and mobilise within existing institutional frameworks. Data observatories respond to this problem not by producing new data in isolation, but by providing the infrastructure through which disparate datasets can be generated, connected, and used in more systematic ways.

In this sense, a visual arts data observatory should function to transform episodic and fragmented forms of evidence into cumulative, policy-relevant knowledge, enabling patterns to emerge across otherwise disconnected sources.

Recommendation 1: Establish the Observatory as a Coordinating Infrastructure

The first and most fundamental recommendation is that the visual arts data observatory should be designed not as a centralised data-producing body, but as a coordinating infrastructure. Whilst the scoping exercise has identified areas where further data collection may be beneficial, the primary function of the observatory should be to aggregate, align, and synthesise existing but currently disparate datasets.

Across the stakeholder cases, three recurring problems emerged in relation to the development of new data-gathering initiatives:

1. Duplication of existing efforts: Many visual arts stakeholders already collect similar forms of data, often from overlapping populations.
2. Survey fatigue: Participation rates may decline where respondents are repeatedly asked to complete highly similar surveys, particularly where the impact of participation is unclear.
3. Further fragmentation of the evidence base: Existing data collection operates across different timescales, methodological frameworks, and categorical systems, limiting comparability and cumulative analysis.

Rather than introducing another isolated data-gathering mechanism, the observatory should function as a connective infrastructure between existing sources of evidence. Its role would be:

- to aggregate datasets currently managed independently across the sector;
- to support the standardisation of key variables and classifications;
- to identify areas of overlap, absence, and complementarity;
- and to translate disparate datasets into policy-relevant outputs.

This approach directly reflects the structure of the sector itself. As the CVAN case demonstrates, knowledge is already distributed across regional networks, thematic studies, and organisational datasets. The challenge is not to replace these existing systems, but to develop a coordinated model that enables their integration.

This recommendation is strongly supported across multiple stakeholder cases:

- **Arts Council England (ACE)** highlights that the problem is not simply a lack of data, but a lack of consistency, connectivity and longitudinal evidence across existing data sources. As Helen Cooper notes, the challenge is one of "bringing fragmented data together" and developing "a joined up approach rather than all these silos across different art forms."[xi]
- **The National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH)** demonstrates a model of distributed evidence infrastructure, where value is generated through synthesis and translation rather than primary data collection.[xii]
- **Artquest** provides a working prototype of a cumulative data system, where ongoing, standardised data collection allows longitudinal analysis across organisations.[xiii]
- **Crafts Council** highlights duplication across the sector, with multiple organisations collecting similar data independently.

The initial development phase of the visual arts data observatory would therefore prioritise four strategic directions:

- Map existing datasets across stakeholders
- Identify overlaps, gaps, and complementarities
- Create a shared framework for comparison
- Build a central aggregation layer

Recommendation 2: Develop a Shared Minimum Data Framework

While full standardisation across the visual arts sector is neither feasible nor desirable, there is a clear need for a shared minimum dataset. At present, methodological inconsistency is a major limitation. As noted by Arts Council England, commissioned research often "creeps away" from comparability over time due to methodological variation. A common data model would establish the minimum level of shared information that should be collected consistently across organisations and projects. Rather than replacing local or organisation-specific data collection practices, this would create a common data infrastructure allowing more functional aggregation and comparability across otherwise disparate datasets.

Without some level of standardisation:

- datasets remain incomparable
- aggregation becomes unreliable or unmanageable
- longitudinal analysis is weakened

The observatory should coordinate the development of a core set of shared variables, which could be embedded into existing surveys and datasets.

These might include:

- Basic demographics
- Employment status (freelance, employed, portfolio)
- Income bands (not exact figures to reduce friction)
- Organisational activity indicators
- Core social impact measures

This aligns with the concept of minimum datasets discussed in the NCCH case, where consistent variables enable aggregation across projects. For example, in arts and health contexts, individual projects may differ substantially in setting, artform, participant group and intended outcome, but they can still be made comparable if they collect a small number of shared variables, such as participant demographics, type and duration of intervention, location, referral route, outcome measures and follow-up points. The value of a minimum dataset is therefore not that it standardises the whole project, but that it creates enough common structure for otherwise distinct activities to contribute to a wider evidence base.

The need for a minimum data framework is reinforced by recurring problems of classification across stakeholder contexts:

- **The Council for higher education in art and design (CHEAD)** highlights the inadequacy of current classification systems in capturing freelance and portfolio careers. For instance, the categories used in standard graduate tracking often fail to capture the realities of artist work (for example, freelance, portfolio, intermittent projects, or socially embedded work).

- **Artquest** demonstrates how consistent question design enables longitudinal insight. They achieve this by utilising a longitudinal data gathering model through their Applied partnership.
- **CVAN**'s Artist and Art worker survey currently lacks standardisation across regions limiting its current utility in decision-making contexts.

The goal here is not to achieve uniformity; the value of the visual arts is such that this would obscure its multifaceted value. Rather, a minimum data framework would make each disparate dataset more operable in policy facing contexts. The development of a minimum data framework would allow the observatory to establish a shared evidential infrastructure across the sector without imposing methodological uniformity upon participating organisations. Rather than replacing existing data collection practices, such a framework would define a core set of standardised variables and classifications through which disparate datasets could become interoperable, comparable, and cumulatively analysable.

Recommendation 3: Prioritise Economic Legibility Without Reducing the Sector to It

A central tension across the case reports concerns the role of economic data within visual arts advocacy. On the one hand, economic indicators such as GVA, employment, exports, sales, and business activity remain essential for policy influence, particularly because they align closely with the forms of evidence most readily recognised by government and Treasury decision-making. Organisations such as BAMF demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach: by mobilising robust, repeatable, and internationally comparable economic data, BAMF has been able to position the UK art market within policy discussions around trade, taxation, regulation, and international competitiveness. Its evidence-based advocacy has been particularly visible in relation to Temporary Admission rules, anti-money laundering compliance, and CITES, where economic data is used not simply to describe the market, but to argue for specific regulatory conditions under which the UK art market can remain internationally competitive.

In this respect, BAMF illustrates how economic evidence can be converted into policy leverage when it is attached to clearly defined regulatory issues and a coherent sector narrative. At the same time, however, an over-reliance on economic metrics risks narrowing the definition of value itself. Forms of contribution that are social, cultural, relational, preventative, educational, or long-term can become marginalised precisely because they are harder to quantify or do not translate easily into conventional economic categories. This tension is explicitly recognised in wider sector discussions around the "fetishisation of economic metrics," where cultural value risks becoming equated only with what can be measured, monetised, and rendered legible within existing policy frameworks.[xiv]

This recommendation is synthesised from points made across several stakeholders

- **BAMF** shows how economic data travels effectively into policy, particularly when it is linked to clearly defined regulatory questions such as Temporary Admission, anti-money laundering, and CITES.
- **SLAD** extends this argument by suggesting that economic data alone is insufficient. According to SLAD Director General Paul Hewitt, the sector also requires a narrative-led approach to evidence: one that begins by identifying the political and ideological "dials" the sector wishes to move and then gathers evidence capable of supporting or challenging those perceptions. (see also recommendation 7).[xv]

- **NCCH** by contrast, demonstrates the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitative indicators can show scale, reach, demographic profile, participation, and potential system-level effects, while qualitative accounts are better suited to explaining the mechanisms through which creative practice produces value, including belonging, confidence, expression, trust, and social connection.
- **DCMS** also increasingly recognises the need for broader forms of value. Recent revisions to the Green Book reflect this shift by moving beyond benefit-cost ratios as the sole arbiter of value and giving greater space to qualitative approaches, theory of change accounts, place-based priorities, and long-term public benefit.[xvi]

The implication for the observatory is that economic data must remain central to its work, but should not become the sole organising principle through which the sector is understood. The observatory should be able to translate visual arts data into policy-facing economic formats, including GVA, employment, business activity, regional economic contribution, and supply-chain effects. These are the forms of evidence most likely to travel effectively into government, Treasury, local authority, and investment contexts. Without this kind of economic legibility, the visual arts sector will continue to struggle to position itself alongside better-evidenced creative industries such as film and music.

However, the observatory must also avoid reproducing the assumption that economic value is the only value that matters. Its purpose should not be to reduce the visual arts to market activity, nor to privilege those parts of the sector that are already easiest to quantify. Instead, it should develop an evidential framework capable of holding economic, social, cultural, educational, health, and place-based value together. This means treating qualitative evidence, narrative accounts, case studies, longitudinal practitioner research, and social impact data not as secondary or illustrative, but as necessary forms of evidence in their own right.

This is therefore not simply a technical question about data formats or measurement tools. It is also a political and epistemological question about how value is defined, whose contributions are made visible, and which forms of evidence are recognised as legitimate. A poorly designed observatory could unintentionally reinforce existing hierarchies of value by making already-measurable activity more visible while leaving socially embedded, freelance, grassroots, and long-term forms of cultural production marginal. A well-designed observatory, by contrast, would use economic data strategically while also broadening the terms through which the value of the visual arts is evidenced and understood.

Recommendation 4: Integrate Qualitative and Narrative Evidence

Some of the most significant aspects of the visual arts sector cannot be captured through quantitative metrics alone. While numerical data is essential for demonstrating scale, distribution, and economic contribution, it is less able to account for the lived conditions through which artistic practice is sustained. Issues such as precarity, invisible labour, underpaid or unpaid work, fragmented careers, and long-term professional trajectories often fall outside conventional measurement frameworks. These are not marginal concerns, but central features of how the visual arts sector operates.

This is particularly important in relation to artists and art workers, whose careers are frequently characterised by portfolio employment, intermittent income, project-based work, and forms of labour that are not easily visible in official datasets. Quantitative indicators may show, for example, income levels, employment status, or regional distribution, but they cannot fully explain how artists navigate insecurity, sustain practice over time, or absorb the hidden costs of participation in the sector. Nor can they adequately capture the cumulative effects of exclusion, burnout, caring responsibilities, lack of studio access, or the reliance on unpaid labour and personal subsidy.

The same point applies to social impact. Visual arts activity is frequently valued for its contribution to wellbeing, confidence, belonging, place-making, education, and community cohesion, but these outcomes are rarely produced in simple or immediately measurable ways.

Arnolfini's engagement work provides a useful example: the organisation collects quantitative indicators such as participant demographics, priority postcode reach, and the proportion of wellbeing participants referred through social prescribing networks, but it also asks participants to describe the experience in their own words. This combination matters because the numerical data can demonstrate reach, access, and connection to public-health pathways, while the qualitative responses help explain what the activity actually means to participants and how it affects their sense of confidence, connection, or wellbeing.[xvii] Narrative and qualitative evidence are therefore essential because they help demonstrate not only the presence of impact, but the mechanisms, meanings, and conditions through which visual arts activity produces social value.

For this reason, qualitative evidence should not be treated as supplementary or merely illustrative. Case studies, interviews, longitudinal accounts, participant testimony, practitioner reflection, and place-based narratives are necessary components of the evidence base. They allow the observatory to capture dimensions of value that would otherwise remain invisible, while also providing the interpretive context needed to make quantitative findings meaningful. A robust visual arts data observatory should therefore integrate narrative and qualitative evidence as a core part of its methodology, rather than positioning it as an optional addition to numerical data.

This recommendation is supported by several strands of evidence gathered through the scoping exercise. Across different parts of the visual arts ecosystem, stakeholders repeatedly emphasised that numerical indicators are necessary but insufficient. Quantitative data can establish scale, distribution, and broad patterns, but it often struggles to capture the lived, relational, and long-term dimensions of artistic work and cultural impact.

- **Su Jones'** longitudinal work on artists' lives is particularly important in this respect.[xviii] Her research demonstrates how visual artists sustain practice over time through conditions of systemic precarity, invisible labour, underpayment, personal subsidy, and resilience. These are precisely the kinds of issues that may be widely recognised within the sector, but which are difficult to capture through standard employment or income categories alone. Long-form narrative evidence helps show how these pressures accumulate across a career, and how policy frameworks can fail to recognise artists as central producers of value rather than peripheral beneficiaries of cultural infrastructure.

- **The Crafts Council** offers a complementary perspective through its principle of "no numbers without stories, no stories without numbers."[xix] This formulation captures the evidential balance required for the visual arts. Numbers provide legitimacy, comparability, and scale, but stories provide context, meaning, and explanation. In practice, this means that a statistic about makers' income, regional distribution, or market participation is far more useful when accompanied by qualitative evidence showing how those conditions are experienced, what constraints they produce, and what forms of support would make a practical difference.

- **NCCH** further demonstrates why policy-relevant evidence requires narrative alongside metrics. In creative health contexts, quantitative indicators can show participation levels, demographic reach, referral routes, wellbeing scores, or potential reductions in service demand. However, qualitative accounts are needed to explain how creative practice produces these outcomes: through trust, expression, belonging, confidence, routine, social connection, and place-based relationships.[xx] Without this narrative layer, the evidence risks showing that something has happened without explaining why it matters or how it works.

- **The National Cultural Data Observatory (NCDO)** pilot report reinforces the case for qualitative evidence as a core part of data infrastructure. It cautions that large-scale observatories can subordinate qualitative insight to quantitative data because statistics often carry greater policy authority. Yet it also warns that cultural evaluation can become tied to boosterism, pre-determined policy narratives, or "policy-led evidence rather than evidence-led policy". The implication for a visual arts observatory is that quantitative data should be used to show scale, but qualitative evidence must be retained to explain context, lived experience, power relations, and the meanings through which cultural value is produced.[xxi]

- **Neighbouring data** is a project developed by the Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities. It explored the role of qualitative and narrative data in hyper-local place-based decision making. The project outputs included three published reports, each tackling a different aspect of observatory development. The first is of particular relevance here as it dealt with the building creative methodologies in order to generate data that could inform local decision-making. The project also held focus groups with local authorities, community groups and business improvement districts to explore how these data may be operationalised in practice.[xxii]

  The observatory should include a dedicated qualitative evidence strand, not as an appendix to the "real" data, but as part of its core infrastructure. This could take the form of a structured case study and narrative evidence bank, using a shared submission template across organisations. Each entry should capture the activity type, location, participants, partners, aims, delivery model, evidence collected, and forms of impact identified. Crucially, qualitative material should be linked wherever possible to quantitative indicators. For example, a gallery engagement project might record participant numbers, postcode reach, and social prescribing routes, while also including participant testimony, practitioner reflection, and evidence of changes in confidence, wellbeing, social connection, or cultural participation.

  A similar opportunity was identified in the CHEAD case, where Research Excellence Framework impact case studies were discussed as a potentially underused repository of validated evidence.[xxiii] These case studies already contain extensive accounts of how arts and design research generates cultural, social, educational, economic, and public value. However, in their current form, they are difficult to mobilise for sector advocacy: they are dispersed across institutions, written primarily for research assessment purposes, and not structured around the practical evidence needs of visual arts policy. A data observatory could therefore play an important role in mining and translating this material into a more usable evidence base, categorising case studies by theme, geography, type of impact, beneficiary group, and evidential claim. In doing so, the observatory would not need to create new evidence from scratch, but could convert an existing body of institutionally validated research into a structured resource for policy, advocacy, and sector learning.

To make this evidence policy-usable, the observatory should structure qualitative material systematically. Case studies and narrative accounts could be tagged by theme — health, education, place-making, skills, social cohesion, artist development, environmental sustainability — and analysed through a consistent coding framework. This would allow patterns to emerge across projects, regions, and organisations without flattening their specificity. The aim is not to convert every story into a metric, but to make narrative evidence cumulative, searchable, and capable of informing policy alongside economic and statistical data. This would align the observatory with recent shifts in appraisal and evaluation practice, including greater recognition of theory of change, place-based analysis, and mixed-method evaluation. In short, the observatory should make qualitative evidence usable without stripping it of context.

Recommendation 5: Address classification and visibility (SIC/SOC Codes)

A critical structural issue across the visual arts sector is the way activity is classified within national datasets. The problem is not simply that visual arts activity is absent, but that it is often recorded under categories that do not reflect how the sector understands itself. This contributes to the underestimation of GVA, the invisibility of key actors, and a distorted policy understanding of the sector's scale and contribution.

This issue was clearly identified in the DCMS case. Official statistics carry significant authority in policy contexts, but their reliance on industrial classification systems means that visual arts activity can be obscured within broader creative, cultural, or general business categories. The example of major art market actors such as Christie's, Sotheby's and Bonhams is especially important: where these organisations are classified outside visual arts-specific categories, their contribution is not straightforwardly captured within visual arts GVA estimates.

The development of more specific SIC codes therefore represents a significant opportunity. New categories relating to art auctioneering houses, commercial art galleries, and visual arts creation activities should, over time, make previously obscured activity more visible within official datasets. However, the DCMS interview makes clear that the existence of improved codes will not resolve the problem automatically.

SIC codes are selected by organisations themselves when registering or filing information through systems such as Companies House.[xxiv] These classifications then feed into datasets used to estimate business counts, employment, GVA, and sector activity. The effectiveness of the new codes will therefore depend on whether visual arts organisations, galleries, art market businesses, artist-led spaces, and hybrid organisations understand which codes are relevant to them and adopt them consistently.

This gives the observatory a practical role. **CVAN should support the sector to adopt the correct classifications at source. This could include producing clear guidance on relevant SIC codes, creating a simple decision-tree for different types of organisation, running short classification clinics, and working through regional networks to identify organisations that may currently be misclassified.**

The observatory should also work with DCMS, ACE, ONS, Companies House, and relevant sector bodies to monitor implementation. In this sense, its role would not only be to analyse data after it has been produced. It would also actively improve the quality of future official data by strengthening classification practice across the sector.

The same principle applies to SOC codes, although the issue operates differently. SIC codes classify business activity, while SOC codes classify occupations. Both matter for visual arts visibility because the sector is made up not only of organisations, but also of artists, technicians, curators, producers, art workers, and other forms of cultural labour.

This is particularly important because much visual arts work is freelance, portfolio-based, intermittent, or hybrid. If occupational categories do not adequately capture these forms of labour, then workforce data will continue to underrepresent the sector, even where organisational classification improves. The observatory should therefore treat SIC and SOC visibility as linked but distinct areas of work: one relating to businesses and organisations, the other to labour, occupations, and workforce structure.

The DCMS interview also clarifies the limits of what classification reform can achieve retrospectively.[xxv] Once revised SIC codes are adopted, they should improve future datasets as new data are collected. However, some sources, particularly survey-based datasets such as the Labour Force Survey, are unlikely to be meaningfully recoded retrospectively because the relevant classification structures will have changed.[xxvi]

This means that the benefits of SIC reform will emerge gradually, through future data cycles, rather than immediately correcting historic undercounts. Nevertheless, some retrospective analysis may still be possible. A targeted study could use Companies House records, published accounts, and known sector lists to examine organisations whose activity has historically been hidden within broader categories.

This would build on the logic of Eliza Easton's *Framing the Future* report, where individual major art market actors were examined to demonstrate how classification affects estimates of visual arts value.[xxvii] For the observatory, this suggests a dual approach. Future-facing work should focus on improving adoption of the new codes, while retrospective work should identify where historic classifications are likely to have obscured the sector's contribution.

A more ambitious extension would be to explore a visual arts satellite account or quasi-satellite account. As suggested in the DCMS interview, satellite accounts are useful where a sector cuts across existing SIC categories and is therefore difficult to capture through standard classifications alone. Sport and tourism provide existing examples of this approach.

A visual arts satellite-style account could begin with a sector-defined list of organisations and activities. It could then use available business, employment, and economic data to estimate the direct and indirect value of the sector. This would not replace SIC reform, but would complement it by allowing the sector to define its own boundaries more precisely and test how far official categories capture its actual structure.[xxviii]

The strategic importance of this recommendation is that classification reform operates upstream. Many influential secondary analyses of the arts rely on ONS and DCMS datasets; if visual arts activity is obscured at that level, it remains obscured in the reports, briefings, and policy arguments built from them. Effective adoption of new SIC codes would therefore improve not only official statistics, but the wider ecosystem of secondary research that depends on those statistics. The 2023 McKinsey report *Assessing the direct impact of the UK arts sector* is a useful example: because it draws primarily on ONS and DCMS datasets, its capacity to evidence visual arts specifically is shaped by the categories available in those source datasets.[xxix] In this sense, classification reform is not merely a technical adjustment; it is a foundational intervention in how the sector becomes visible within the wider evidence ecosystem.

Recommendation 6: Design the observatory around tiered access and different user needs

The visual arts data observatory should be designed around different forms of use, rather than a single assumed audience. The same evidence base will need to serve policymakers, analysts, researchers, sector bodies, regional networks, individual organisations, funders, artists, and public-facing advocacy work. These users will not need the same outputs. Some will require access to cleaned and interrogable datasets; others will need dashboards, policy briefings, case studies, or accessible narrative summaries.

This means the observatory should not be imagined simply as a public website or static data portal. It should operate as a layered evidence infrastructure. At one level, it should provide access to cleaned, standardised and downloadable datasets for analytical users. At another, it should produce structured outputs such as dashboards, thematic reports and policy briefings. At a third, it should translate evidence into accessible narratives that can support advocacy, public communication and sector learning.

This recommendation is supported by evidence from both the project interviews as well as the NCDO blueprint:

- **DCMS** explicitly identified data usability as a key requirement. In interview, Principle Social researcher Sam Burthem stated that a visual arts observatory would be useful if users could "download and manipulate" datasets, taking "not maybe the raw data" but usable data that could be worked with, modelled and analysed internally.[xxx] This suggests that government users do not only need finished reports; they need access to interrogable, well-documented data that can be incorporated into their own analytical processes.

- **The NCDO** blueprint provides a useful model for this layered approach. In their new progress report, Appendix 2 distinguishes between published research, live intelligence and insights, data feeds, data sharing, a data exchange hub, and sector data capacity building.[xxxi] This is important because it recognises that an observatory must support different levels of technical confidence and different forms of decision-making, from ready-to-use insight reports to machine-readable feeds and researcher access to quality-assured datasets.

- The wider project evidence shows that different parts of the visual arts sector have different capacities to use data. Larger organisations, government departments and researchers may be able to work directly with datasets, while smaller organisations often seek interpreted outputs that can support funding applications, advocacy, benchmarking and strategic planning. A single-output model would therefore risk serving only the most data-confident users.

  In practice, the observatory should be built around at least three levels of access. The first should be a layer dedicated to interrogable data. This should provide cleaned datasets, metadata in the form of downloadable files. It is targeted at users interested with completing their own analysis and statistical models. This layer would allow organisations such as DCMS, academic researchers or sector analysts to explore data directly and recombine it with other sources. It also serves as a transparency layer supporting more processed outputs.

The second should be a structured insight layer, translating data into dashboards, thematic reports, regional comparisons, policy briefings and evidence summaries. This would be particularly useful for CVAN, regional networks, funders, local authorities and visual arts organisations seeking to understand trends, benchmark activity, or make a case for investment.

Artquest provides a useful precedent here through its collaborative data collection and sharing initiative with arts organisations working directly with artists. It's Applied programme operates as a collaborative data partnership with a network of visual arts organisations. Artquest gathers information directly from artists at the point of engagement, such as after submitting applications, attending events, or accessing services.[xxxii] This model produces a continuous, longitudinal dataset rather than a bounded survey, with consistent questions asked over time and across partners.

The third should be an accessible narrative layer, presenting key findings in forms that do not assume technical literacy. This might include short reports, case studies, explainers, visual summaries and advocacy materials. This layer is essential if the observatory is to support not only analysis, but also public communication and narrative change.

A data observatory which provides this degree and breadth of usability would seek to overcome data issues found elsewhere. A common weakness of data platforms is that they make evidence technically available while leaving it practically inaccessible to those without the time or institutional capacity to interpret it. This point is reinforced by the Centre for Cultural Value's *Making Data Work* project, which found that the sector already holds significant quantitative data resources, but that their value depends on being linked, made accessible, and combined with qualitative evidence through common standards and shared infrastructure.[xxxiii]

A successful visual arts data observatory should therefore operate as a mechanism of translation between different actors. It should preserve analytical depth for those wishing to work directly with datasets, while also producing interpreted outputs that allow the same evidence to be mobilised by organisations, networks, policymakers, funders, and advocates. Its value would lie not simply in data storage, but in converting dispersed evidence into usable forms of knowledge, capable of strengthening the sector's position within policy, funding, and public narratives.

Recommendation 7: Address *narrative* as a strategic dimension of the observatory

Perhaps the most important insight from the scoping exercise is that the visual arts sector faces a narrative problem as much as a data problem. Across the case studies, the visual arts appears as a sector in which evidence exists, but is fragmented, unevenly mobilised, and often poorly aligned with the narratives through which policy attention is secured.

This is especially clear in the interview with the Society of London Art Dealers (SLAD). Paul Hewitt's argument is not that the art market lacks economic data. On the contrary, he argues that raw economic data has been put forward for decades, but has not achieved the degree of policy change sought by the sector. For Hewitt, the problem is one of political optics: the visual arts are still too easily associated with elitism, conspicuous consumption, and what he described as the art market having the reputation of being "toys for toffs".

This point should not be dismissed as a problem only for the commercial art market. It speaks to a wider identity crisis within the visual arts. The sector contains high-value private sales, public galleries, artist-led spaces, freelancers, education, community practice, health interventions, place-making, international trade, and grassroots cultural labour. These activities are all part of the visual arts ecosystem, but they do not naturally produce one coherent public story.

The observatory should therefore not only produce data. It should help the sector understand which narratives are currently dominant, which are missing, and which forms of evidence are needed to shift public and policy understanding. This does not mean producing advocacy in place of evidence. It means recognising that evidence only becomes influential when it is attached to a clear account of what the sector is, what it contributes, and why it matters.

This recommendation is supported by several strands of evidence from the scoping exercise:

- **SLAD** provides the clearest articulation of the narrative problem. Hewitt argues that the sector should begin by identifying the political and ideological "dials" it wants to move, and then work backwards to determine what data is needed to support, challenge, or debunk existing perceptions. This reverses the usual logic of data collection. Rather than asking only "what data do we have?", it asks "what claims must the sector be able to make, and what evidence would make those claims credible?"[xxxiv]

- **The SLAD case also shows both the risk and the strategic potential of narrative framing.** The membership survey provides valuable economic evidence on sales, employment, market structure and regulatory pressures.[xxxv] However, because the art market is associated with high-value objects, wealthy collectors and concentrated capital flows, economic evidence alone can inadvertently reproduce the very perception of elitism that the sector wishes to challenge. This demonstrates why data must be interpreted within a narrative strategy, not simply presented as neutral evidence.

- **DCMS evidence reinforces the importance of policy alignment.** The DCMS interview shows that data is most useful when it speaks directly to government priorities, such as place, economic contribution, public value, cultural heritage capital, high street renewal and "what works" evidence. This suggests that the observatory should not only gather evidence, but translate it into the terms through which policy decisions are actually made.

- **The NCDO report** provides a broader model for this approach. It argues that an observatory should be more than a data centre or dashboard, and should support published research, live intelligence, data sharing, data exchange, and sector capacity building. Its Bradford demonstrator was explicitly designed to answer questions that mattered to users, rather than simply display metrics.[xxxvi] This is important because narrative construction depends on interpretation, not just accumulation.

- **The Crafts Council** case offers a complementary insight. Nicky Dewar emphasised that data needs to be "sliced and diced" in ways that tell different stories for different stakeholders.[xxxvii] This reinforces the point that a single dataset may need to support multiple narratives: economic growth, skills, wellbeing, place-making, education, social cohesion, or workforce resilience, depending on the audience and policy context.

In practice, this could begin by mapping the dominant narratives currently attached to the visual arts: elitism, luxury, public subsidy, precarity, community value, creative health, education, place-making, international competitiveness and creative industries spillover. Each narrative should then be tested against available evidence: what supports it, what complicates it, what refutes it, and what remains unevidenced.

The observatory could then develop a set of evidence-led narrative briefs. These would not replace the underlying datasets, but would translate them into policy-relevant arguments for different audiences. For example, one brief might address the visual arts and health; another might focus on visual arts and high street renewal; another on art education and talent pipelines; another on the art market's role in trade and international competitiveness; another on artists' livelihoods and the sustainability of cultural production.

The practical output should be that these narrative briefs sit alongside the data framework. In this way, the observatory should not be a passive storehouse of information. It should be operated in a way that supports narrative development and that helps the visual arts sector understand itself, explain itself, and intervene effectively. This is essential because the struggle for visibility is not only a struggle over data. It is also a struggle over meaning.

Concluding discussion: value, visibility and the limits of measurement

Across the case studies, the central issue is not simply the absence of data, but the uneven conditions under which different forms of value become visible, legitimate and actionable within policy contexts. The visual arts sector generates economic, social, cultural, educational, health and place-based value, yet these forms of contribution are not equally recognised. Economic indicators such as sales, employment, GVA and exports travel relatively easily into policy because they align with established governmental and Treasury frameworks. By contrast, forms of value that are relational or preventative —wellbeing, social cohesion, education, creative development, place-making and artistic labour — are harder to evidence and therefore less consistently recognised.

This produces a structural asymmetry within the evidence base. The parts of the sector that are easiest to measure are often those most visible in policy, while the practices most central to the sector's public value can remain marginal within dominant evaluative frameworks. This is not simply a technical problem of data collection. It is also a political problem concerning how value is defined, which forms of evidence are considered legitimate, and how resources are justified. The wider critique of the "fetishisation of economic metrics" is therefore highly relevant: when value becomes equated with what can be measured, monetised and rendered legible through existing frameworks, other forms of cultural and social contribution risk being treated as secondary.

At present, the visual arts are represented by multiple partial accounts. DCMS captures industries; ACE captures funded organisations and participation; Artquest captures artists' working lives; DACS captures copyright and royalty flows; SLAD captures dealer markets; NCCH translates artistic activity into health and wellbeing evidence. These are all valuable, but they do not yet accumulate into a coherent account of the sector.

The proposed observatory should therefore connect datasets, stabilise definitions, enable comparison, and translate between different evidential frameworks. In this sense, it is not only technical infrastructure, but interpretive infrastructure.

This is particularly important because the visual arts are harder to represent than most other creative industries. The sector includes freelance labour, public institutions, commercial markets, artist-led activity, education, social practice and non-ticketed participation. It is less visible partly because it is more complex.

Recent changes to the Green Book, alongside the wider policy environment developing around place-based growth, community cohesion and long-term public value, create an opportunity for the visual arts sector. These shifts increase the relevance of evidence that can demonstrate not only economic return, but also social, civic and place-based outcomes. Notwithstanding the important updates to SIC codes, classification reform alone will not capture the full value of the visual arts. The corollary is methodological: if policy is beginning to recognise more complex forms of value, the sector needs evidence frameworks capable of capturing them through both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The challenge, then, is not simply to produce more data. It is to transform dispersed knowledge into influence. This requires aggregation, so that evidence becomes cumulative; translation, so that it becomes usable; and narrative, so that it connects to the ways value is recognised in policy.

Appendix 1 – Methodological approach

This report is based on a three-month scoping exercise conducted between March and May 2026. The purpose of the exercise was not to produce a comprehensive statistical account of the visual arts sector, but to assess the current data landscape, identify gaps in existing evidence, and develop practical recommendations for the possible design of a Visual Arts Data Observatory.

The research used a case study approach, informed by Yin's model of case study research.[xxxviii] Each stakeholder organisation was initially treated as a separate case. This made it possible to examine each organisation in relation to its own role within the visual arts ecosystem, the forms of data it currently collects or uses, the populations it is able to reach, and the specific evidence gaps it identifies.

For each case, a short case report was produced. These reports drew on two main sources of evidence: existing documents and datasets associated with the organisation, and a semi-structured stakeholder interview. Documentary material included published reports, survey outputs, dashboards, technical reports, policy briefings and other relevant evidence sources. The interviews were used to understand how stakeholders interpret their own data practices, what they see as the main limitations of current evidence, and what kinds of data infrastructure would be most useful for future advocacy, planning and policy engagement.

The case study approach was particularly useful because the visual arts data landscape is highly uneven. Different organisations collect data for different purposes, using different categories, populations and methods. Treating each stakeholder as an individual case allowed these differences to be understood on their own terms before attempting to draw broader conclusions across the sector.

Following the individual case analysis, a cross-case comparison was undertaken. This involved identifying recurring themes across the stakeholder cases, including problems of classification, duplication, inconsistent question design, lack of longitudinal evidence, uneven regional comparability, and the difficulty of translating sector knowledge into policy-legible evidence. This cross-case analysis informed the recommendations set out in the main report.

A short supplementary survey was also distributed through CVAN's regional networks to gather additional insight from visual arts organisations. This was not intended to function as a representative sector-wide survey. Instead, it provided a further indicative layer of evidence about current data practices, perceived gaps, and organisational needs across different regional contexts.

Overall, the methodology was designed to support a practical scoping exercise. Its aim was to map existing evidence, understand stakeholder needs, and identify the kinds of infrastructure that would allow existing data-gathering efforts to become more cumulative, comparable and useful. The recommendations should therefore be understood as emerging from a combined process of stakeholder consultation, documentary analysis, case-based comparison and sector mapping.

Limitations

As a scoping exercise, the research has several limitations. The stakeholder sample was purposive rather than representative, and the supplementary survey should be treated as indicative rather than statistically generalisable. The findings therefore do not claim to provide a complete account of the visual arts sector. Instead, they identify structural patterns in the current evidence landscape and use these patterns to inform recommendations for the future development of the observatory.

Appendix 2

Recommendation 1

To expand on the idea of observatory as a "central aggregation layer".

The observatory should not collect the raw data itself, or attempt to force organisations to use a single database. The central aggregation layer should be developed in a way that can bring together data from existing sources and make them comparable.

Some examples from stakeholders:

- Artquest's artist survey/dashboard
- CVAN regional artist and art worker surveys
- DACS royalty and copyright data
- ACE participation or NPO reporting data
- SLAD/BAMF art market data
- local authority cultural impact surveys
- individual gallery data, like Arnolfini's audience, engagement, postcode and wellbeing data

Currently, these disparate data sit separately. They use different categories, different questions, different timeframes, and different formats.

A central aggregation layer would be the system or process that sits above them and works to bring these sources into relation with one another.

In practice, it might involve:

- Further mapping on which data exist
- identifying shared variables, such as region, organisation type, artist status, income band, audience group, postcode, participation type
- standardising categories where possible
- cleaning data so it can be compared
- storing or indexing datasets in one place
- producing dashboards, reports, or downloadable datasets from the combined material

Recommendation 2

One key barrier when defining visual arts so broadly (market value, social cohesion, health and wellbeing, etc) is that across data collecting instruments there is overlap between the population addressed (audience, tourist, artist, art worker, community), key definitions (what counts as an artist? What is engagement? How is studio access operationalised), and data collection protocols (survey wording, timeframes, categories, formatting).

In practice, this may be operationalised through metadata standards which should be operated through the data observatory. All stakeholder datasets which are to be submitted to the observatory would provide key basic descriptive information. For example:

Metadata question	Example
Who collected these data?	VASW
When was it collected?	March – May 2024
Who was surveyed	Artists and art workers in the Southwest region
Number of participants	923
Recruitment model	Open call via mailing lists and regional network
What categories were used	Income bands, employment status, studio access
Where responses anonymous	Yes
Geographical area	Southwest England
What limitations apply	Self-selecting sample; not statistically representative
Can it be reused	Yes, in anonymised form

By so doing, aggregation obstacles become softened. In effect, the use of a minimum data framework would allow a quick of assessment of:

- Whether datasets can be compared
- Their geographical scope (regional/national)
- Addressed populations (artist, organisations, audiences, galleries, funders)
- Statistical representativeness /sampling strategy
- Time period
- Which variables are used
- Limitations

The benefits of a minimum data framework are demonstrated clearly in adjacent sectors, particularly public health and healthcare research. In these fields, minimum dataset approaches are used to improve the quality of data collection, support comparability between studies, and reduce the risk that evidence is distorted by inconsistent or incomplete variables. Kwok et al. emphasise that "a standardized approach is important to reduce the risk of bias," while also defining the minimum dataset as a framework for improving study design and appraisal. For the visual arts, the lesson is not that cultural data should imitate health data, but that a shared minimum framework can help transform fragmented local evidence into more reliable, aggregated, and policy-relevant outputs.[xxxix]

The purpose of a minimum data framework is not to impose full uniformity on a diverse sector, but to create the minimum conditions under which dispersed forms of evidence can become comparable, reusable and cumulatively meaningful. The infrastructure studies

literature is helpful here because it shows that standards, categories and classifications are not neutral administrative details; they shape what becomes visible as evidence. Bowker and Star's work on classification demonstrates that categories organise social reality as well as describe it, while Star's work on infrastructure shows that the most important systems are often mundane, embedded and invisible until they fail.[xl] For the visual arts, this means that the absence of shared variables, metadata and definitions is not a minor technical

inconvenience, but a structural barrier to evidencing sector value. A minimum data framework would therefore provide the connective infrastructure through which existing stakeholder datasets could be aligned without erasing their local specificity.

Recommendation 3

NCCH provides a useful model for understanding why quantitative and qualitative evidence need to be combined in the visual arts. Its work in creative health draws on academic research, evaluation data, case studies, and practitioner submissions, translating these into evidence summaries for policymakers, NHS stakeholders, and government committees. In this context, quantitative evidence is important because it can demonstrate scale, identify patterns, and speak to policy concerns around cost, service use, and measurable health outcomes. For example, data on participation numbers, demographic reach, referral routes, health service use, or changes in wellbeing scores can help make the case for creative health interventions in terms recognisable to health and public policy systems. However, these indicators alone cannot explain how or why arts-based interventions work, nor can they capture the relational, contextual, and experiential dimensions of creative practice. This is where qualitative evidence becomes essential: case studies, participant testimony, practitioner accounts, and place-based narratives show how creative activity is embedded in relationships, trust, locality, and lived experience.

The importance of this combined approach is especially clear in relation to preventative health and social prescribing. A purely quantitative account might show that participants report improved wellbeing, reduced loneliness, or lower use of particular services. But without qualitative evidence, it is difficult to understand whether those outcomes arise from artistic practice itself, from regular social contact, from the safety of the setting, from the relationship with facilitators, or from a combination of these factors. Conversely, qualitative accounts can powerfully describe transformation, confidence, belonging, or recovery, but may struggle to persuade policymakers unless connected to indicators that demonstrate scale, consistency, or potential public-service value. NCCH's approach therefore illustrates the need for evidence that can move between individual experience and system-level relevance. For a visual arts data observatory, this suggests that social impact should not be measured only through numerical indicators, nor represented only through narrative case studies, but through a structured mixed-evidence model that enables both to inform one another.

This logic is also reflected in Arnolfini's engagement work, where wellbeing data combines quantitative indicators — such as social prescribing routes, priority postcode reach, and selected wellbeing terms — with qualitative responses to questions such as how participants would describe the experience to a friend. That kind of model is valuable because it captures both measurable reach and lived meaning.

Recommendation 4

Quantitative evidence remains important in this context. It can show participation levels, demographic reach, referral routes, frequency of engagement, changes in wellbeing scores, or potential effects on service use. These indicators help translate creative health activity into terms that are recognisable within health, social care and public policy systems. However, they rarely explain the mechanisms through which change occurs. A dataset may show that participants report reduced loneliness or improved wellbeing, but it cannot, by itself, explain whether this change resulted from the artistic process, the regularity of attendance, the trust developed with facilitators, the social environment of the group, or the experience of being recognised and valued within a particular place.

This is where narrative evidence becomes indispensable. Case studies, participant testimony, practitioner accounts and place-based descriptions can explain how creative practice produces value through trust, expression, confidence, belonging, routine and social connection. In creative health contexts, these mechanisms are often the substance of the intervention itself. The value of the activity does not lie only in an outcome measured at the end, but in the process through which participants engage, form relationships, develop confidence and experience themselves differently. Narrative accounts are therefore not a weaker substitute for quantitative data, but a necessary means of understanding the conditions under which visual arts activity generates social value.

This point has direct relevance for the design of a visual arts data observatory. If the observatory is to capture the sector's contribution to health, wellbeing and social impact, it cannot rely only on metrics that count attendance, participation or outputs. Nor should it treat qualitative material as anecdotal evidence that merely illustrates the "real" findings. Instead, it should develop a structured approach to narrative evidence, enabling case studies and lived experience accounts to be gathered, tagged, compared and analysed alongside quantitative indicators. In doing so, the observatory would be better able to demonstrate not only that visual arts activity has impact, but how that impact is produced, for whom, and under what conditions.

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