

Northumberland Audience Research Project

Executive Summary

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Northumberland Demographics

Current Audience Demographic Data

- **Age:** 16–24-year-olds & 25–34-year-olds are the least likely to access and engage in culture in Northumberland.
- **Gender:** There are a higher proportion of females than males engaging in Northumberland's cultural offer. ONS data does indicate there being more females in the county (51.2%/48.8%) however only a third of the currently engaged audience is male.
- **Ethnicity:** With regards to ethnicity, White residents account for 97.2% of the entire population of Northumberland, with the next most common being Asian/Asian British (0.8%) and this is mirrored almost like for like for those currently engaged in Northumberland's cultural offer.
- **Health Status:** The ONS estimates that just over 1 in 5 residents of the county have health related limitations on their day-to-day activities (10.9% limited a little, 9.8% limited a lot). In comparison, less than 1 in 10 of those engaged in Northumberland's cultural offer described their day-to-day activities as being limited due to a health condition (s) (7% limited a little, 2% limited a lot).

Specific Audiences

Young people

Awareness and Sources of Information

Our research revealed that the main drivers of awareness and sources of information of cultural events and venues in Northumberland for young people are:

Geography & Ease of Access – younger people are more likely to be familiar with venues that are close to them geographically, or are of easy access via public transport, with the exception of major out of region annual events such as Reading and Leeds festival.

Peer Networks & Social Media – younger people are exposed to new cultural events and venues in the county via social media and through word of mouth from their friends. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok are key social media platforms that young people use. Often they will be exposed to new events or venues by seeing their peers post on social media about it, or by word of mouth recommendation from their peers.

Exposure via School & Other Institutions – Schools and other clubs and venues that young people attend play a pivotal role in exposing them to new cultural activities, venues, and events in the county. As demonstrated on the online survey, 43% get information from school or college, and a further 21% from groups they attend.

Barriers to Accessing Culture

Awareness - 24% of young people that completed the online survey cited not knowing about events and venues as a key barrier.

Interest – 15% of young people that completed the online survey stated that Northumberland's current programme of cultural events and venues that they are aware of aren't interesting to them. This was echoed in the focus group in Blyth.

Travel - A further 21% stated that venues and events are hard to get to in Northumberland, highlighting the difficulty young people in Northumberland face when trying to travel around the county. The perception from young people is that the county isn't well connected, and without a car getting around is very difficult. Public transport in Northumberland is seen as unreliable and expensive by young people.

Expense & Value for Money – 24% of those that completed the online survey stated that accessing culture and cultural events is too expensive. A further 9% said that they are nervous they won't get value for money, meaning 1 in 3 young people in Northumberland see finances as a key barrier to accessing culture.

Learning Disabled

Awareness and Sources of Information

Our research revealed that the main drivers of awareness and sources of information of cultural events and venues in Northumberland for the learning disabled are:

Venues & groups they attend – Those at the focus group explained they find out about new cultural events and activities through advertisements at the cinema and groups they attend such as Headway Arts.

Word of mouth - Word of mouth from their peers, family members, and those that care for them is a key source of information. A family member of an attendee to the focus group explained those who work at the supported housing schemes can occasionally gatekeep information from those with learning disabilities and this has been a challenge in the past.

Social Media – YouTube was a very common answer.

Other Sources - leaflets through the post, TV advertisements of new movies and tv shows, and local newspapers such as the Chronicle were also cited as sources of information.

Barriers to Accessing Culture

Awareness – Excluding cinemas and some of the larger theatres and museums, awareness of the county's cultural offer amongst the Learning Disabled remains a key challenge.

To overcome this challenge, there was the idea of having a curated newsletter specifically for the Learning Disabled, providing them with all the information from one source. The idea of a Northumberland Cultural YouTube channel specifically for the Learning Disabled where they could watch trailers of upcoming events, productions, and exhibitions was suggested and gathered support across the room.

Linked to this was another popular suggestion, allowing members of the Learning Disabled to make their own videos reviewing the venues and exhibitions.

Infrastructure & Attitudes – A family member of a participant mentioned that past bad experiences at venues can put them off going to other venues and events in future.

Up-skilling and training staff to be able to assist those with additional needs was suggested as a solution. There was also the idea of productions having specific dates and performances for audiences with Learning Disabilities.

Covid-19 Safety – Almost three quarters of those in the room said yes when asked if the Covid-19 pandemic makes them afraid to go out and visit venues.

In order to overcome this, it was suggested that organisations could offer out taster days to show those with additional needs around the venue. This would help them rebuild their confidence after being locked down for so long, and it would make them feel reassured and welcomed.

Future Programming

We also asked those at the Learning Disabled focus group what they would like to see more of in Northumberland:

- There was consensus among the group for more interactive shows and events. They'd like to see more venues where they can get involved in the exhibitions or shows and get immersed in the experience. Examples of previous trips were given where they could join in and interact with actors, and touch and interact with the exhibits.
- They also said they would like to see more people on stage that reflect them and their community.
- There was also support from some for more outdoor events in the summer, with the Family Festival in Bedlington given as a good example.

Rural & Low-Income Audiences

Engaging with Low-Income and Rural Audiences in Northumberland

To get a sense of whether these audiences want to connect with culture, at the market days across Northumberland, we asked respondents whether they would describe themselves as being interested in culture and cultural events. 76% said yes. Of the 24% that said no, the main reasons were:

Lack of Interest: 80% of those that said no, said they are just not interested in cultural events, activities, or venues. When asked to go into more detail, responses included them being more interested in sports than museums or theatres, and others said Northumberland's cultural offer doesn't appeal to them.

Finances: 13% said they aren't interested in culture and cultural events in Northumberland as it is perceived as too expensive and costly. One respondent said:

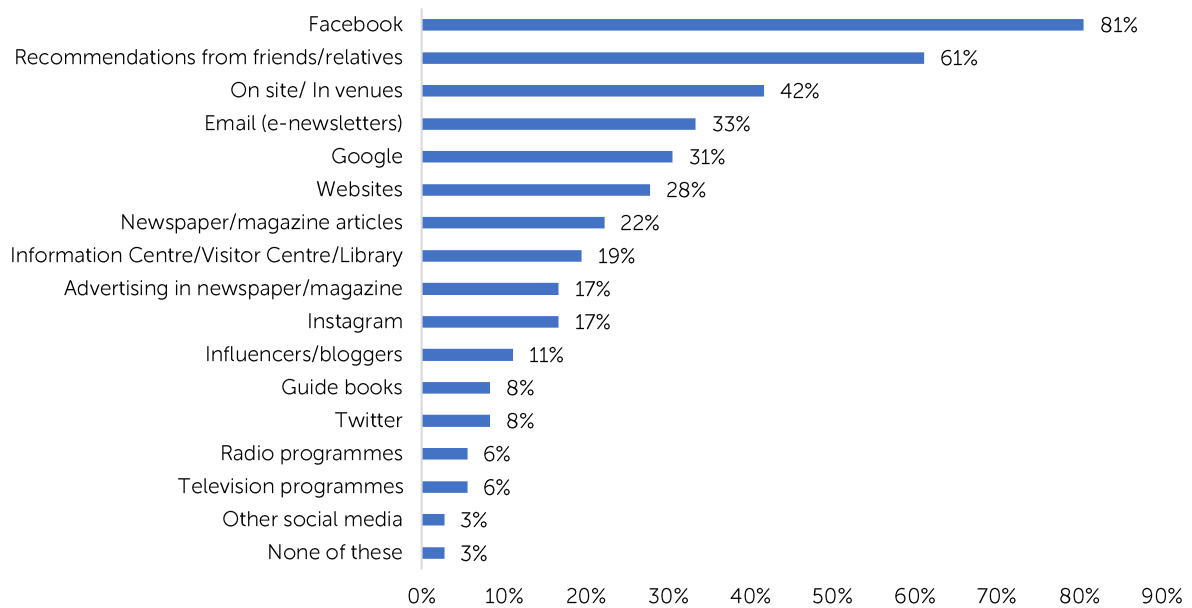
'Having children at home and a low budget makes it very difficult'

Lack of awareness: 7% also stated a lack of awareness as a main reason for not being interested in cultural events and activities.

Sources of Information

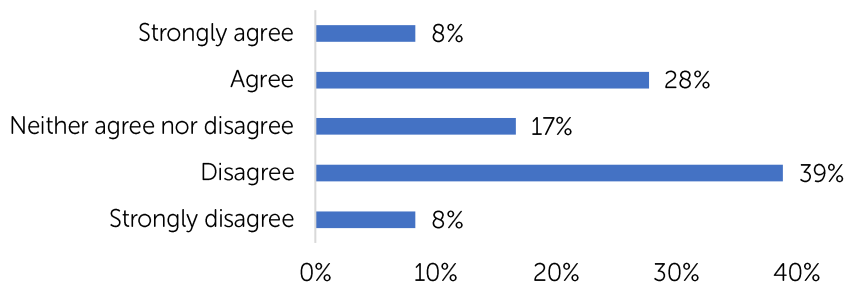
Our research found that these audiences get their information from Facebook, recommendations from friends and relatives, onsite/in venues, and to a lesser extent email newsletters and google searches:

Where do you typically find out about cultural activities, events, and venues in Northumberland?



We also wanted to understand how easy these audiences feel it is to find information on cultural events and venues in Northumberland. In the online survey, we asked respondents whether they agree or disagree that it is easy to find out about cultural venues, events, and activities in Northumberland. 47% disagreed or strongly disagreed:

It is easy to find out about cultural events, activities, and venues in Northumberland



As well as understanding where these audiences look for information and how difficult they feel it is to find out about Northumberland's cultural offer, there was also feedback both on the online survey and the focus group around ways to reach

these audiences and ways to encourage them to get involved in Northumberland's cultural offer.

As saw on the online survey, 42% of this audience get their information about cultural events and exhibitions in venues they already attend. One attendee to the online focus group suggested venues across Northumberland collaborating to co-promote each other for the benefit of the county's cultural offer:

'I've struggled to find out about new things. I go to the things I know about and they're good at telling you what's upcoming at their venue, but more signposting about events at other venues In Northumberland would help.'

At the online focus group there was also a discussion about the perceptions of the cultural offer in Northumberland, and whether it could be seen as more inviting to new audiences. One attendee said:

'Culture in Northumberland is not very welcoming or inviting.'

The attendee gave a specific example of a visual arts exhibition in Northumberland that she attended, and she said it was not very welcoming, and it felt like it was created by a very exclusive group of people, for a very exclusive group of people.

Another attendee to the focus group talked about how people are greeted and the entrances to venues and potentially making them more inviting for all audiences:

'If you don't come from an arty background, some of these venues are really intimidating. It can put people off. How you enter spaces and how you draw people in is really-important.'

Digital Engagement

At the focus group we were keen to understand how these audiences engage with culture digitally and whether digital engagement can work in rural Northumberland.

Most participants had engaged digitally with culture in Northumberland at least once over lockdown, but most tended to be sporadic. The consensus among the group was that that digital engagement for them was merely a substitute for engaging in culture whilst they couldn't attend venues in person. One participant said:

'Some online performances have been really good, but you do really miss the audience and the atmosphere'

This was backed up by another participant, who added:

'Streaming is better than nothing, but it definitely isn't the same'

Key Themes and Questions

The following section examines key themes identified in the brief. Data in this section comes from a combination of the online surveys, the four focus groups, and the data gathered across the market days.

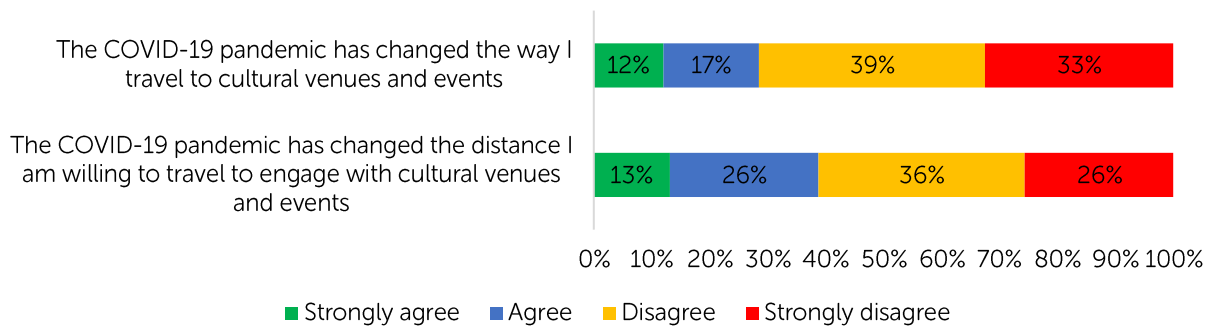
Cultural Habits

Travel Habits

Before the pandemic a large proportion of people relied on their car as a main form of transport to cultural events and activities, and this has increased by 9% since the beginning of the pandemic.

When asked to explain why their travel patterns have changed, the majority of those on the online survey explained that they no longer feel comfortable using public transport due to Covid-19.

We also presented respondents with two statements relating to travel and asked them to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements. Over a quarter of people agreed or strongly agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way they travel to cultural venues and events.



Of that 39% that agreed the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the distance they are willing to travel to access cultural venues and events, 84% stated that they now prefer to stay local and travel less distance away from home.

Future Programming

Respondents to the online survey and those who attended the focus groups were asked what they think is missing from the cultural offer and what would they like to see more of in Northumberland.

There is a diverse range of suggestions from the online survey, the most common being more live music and theatres. However, there were lots of other suggestions including dog friendly art events, pop up history events, art workshops and creative sessions, independent cinema, stand-up comedy, and dance shows to name a few.

There were also comments from some on the online survey that they believe Northumberland is well served and punches above its weight as a county.

A reoccurring theme throughout the focus groups was to make use of empty buildings and units that are no longer occupied due to the pandemic. One respondent at the focus group said:

'After the pandemic there are lots of empty shops. There will be lots of spaces that could be used as pop up spaces. Have galleries, performances, and use them to educate people.'

Frequency of Engagement

Our research found people are not accessing cultural events & venues as often as they were before the pandemic.

This was a topic of discussion at both the focus group in Berwick and the online focus group. One participant to the online focus group said:

'I used to go to things far more often before the pandemic. But it is largely to do with things not being open now, and the amount of things that have disappeared. Especially the smaller artists led spaces.'

A similar point was made in Berwick, with one participant explaining that he doesn't attend as many events as before the pandemic, but this is because the volume of events is nowhere near where it was prior to the pandemic. He explained the appetite is there, and he wants to start visiting venues, exhibitions, and events again but there are no longer as many around.

Our evidence suggests while audiences are not attending cultural events, activities, or venues as often as they were pre-pandemic, this is not due to a loss of interest or appetite, but rather due to challenges around awareness, information sharing, and covid safety concerns.

Benefits of Accessing Culture

75% of those that completed the online survey agreed that they benefit from Northumberland's cultural offer.

We followed up by asking respondents to explain how they benefit from Northumberland's cultural offer. There were several themes that emerged from the feedback:

Connecting with family & friends – One of the main benefits residents of Northumberland believe they get from Northumberland's cultural offer is the ability and opportunity to connect and make memories with family, friends, and other liked-minded Northumbrians.

Education & life skills – Another benefit that was commonly mentioned was culture's role in educating local people, giving them the opportunity to learn about their home and heritage.

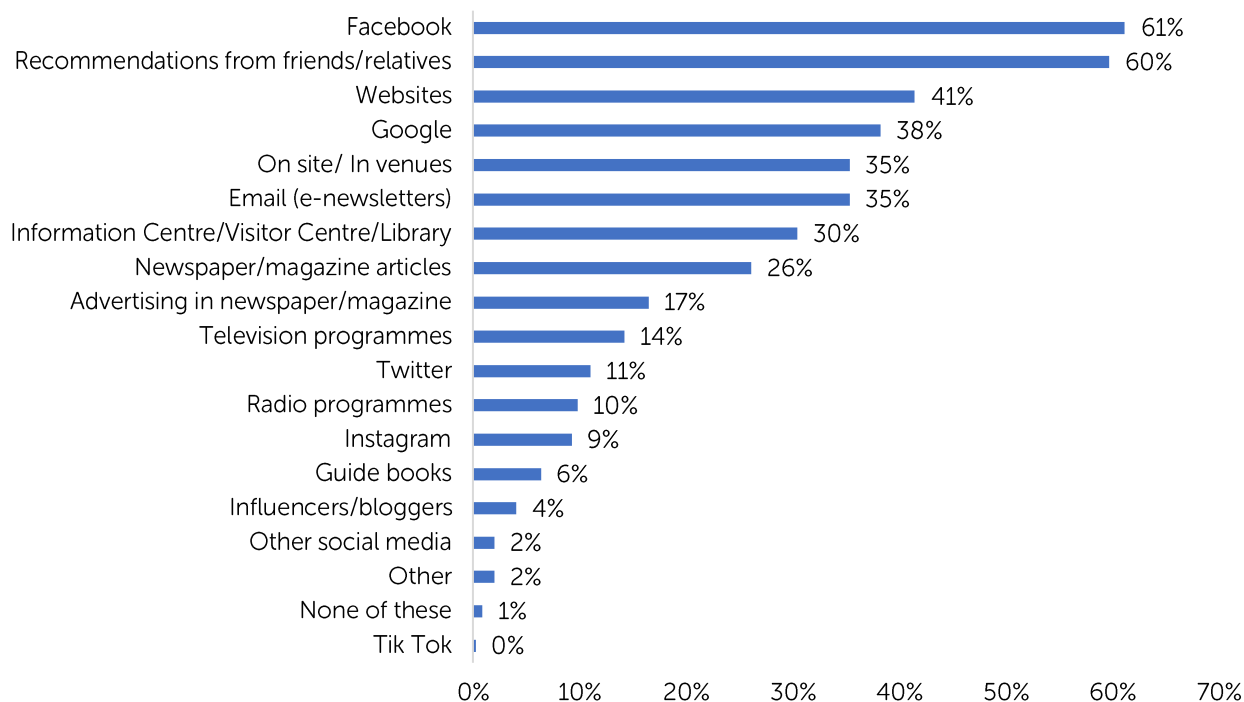
Improving wellbeing & quality of life – A significant number of those who said they benefit from culture in Northumberland stated that the county's museums, theatres, festivals, gardens, cinema's and other venues play a key role in maintaining their physical and mental wellbeing.

Sources of Information

45% of those who completed the online survey agreed or strongly agreed that it is easy to find out information on cultural events, venues, and activities in Northumberland. However, over a quarter disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Respondents to the online survey were also asked where they usually go to, to find information on cultural events, venues, and activities in the county. Facebook was the most popular, followed by recommendations from friends and family, websites, google searches, and then on site/ in venues. 35% of respondents also stated that they get information from email newsletters:

Where do you typically find out about cultural activities, events, and venues in Northumberland?



To gather more qualitative data on the subject of sources of information, in the focus groups we conducted, we asked participants how venues could make accessing information easier:

Venue collaboration - One suggestion was for venues across the county to work closely together to co-promote their productions, exhibitions, events, and activities. There were some comments that currently the cultural offer in Northumberland is quite fragmented, and venues from across the county would benefit from a more joined up approach to the promotion of the county's cultural offer. 'Cross-Fertilisation' was a common phrase that was brought up throughout the research.

One central resource - Across all 4 focus groups there was an appetite for a central resource that shows what cultural events and activities are taking place across Northumberland.

Longer runs - There was also agreement in Berwick that, usually most productions aren't around long enough to gain word of mouth momentum, which they believe is the most powerful marketing tool. One attendee explained:

'If things are on longer, that would allow time for word of mouth to spread and gather momentum. Unfortunately, at the minute by the time you find out about things happening they've been and gone.'

This point also came through on the online survey, with two examples below:

'I've lived here a year and often only hear about events after they've happened! More marketing and advertising needed.'

'The issue for me is that shows (theatre/music) are often only on near me for one day and if I'm not free on that day, I miss the show.'

Barriers to Accessing Culture

Awareness - For 38% of respondents, a lack of awareness is a key barrier to them accessing culture and cultural venues in Northumberland.

Finances - 28% of those that completed the online survey said accessing culture is too expensive. In the focus group in Berwick, one participant mentioned that it is particularly expensive for families, especially if there are two adults and then multiple children.

The financial barrier is causing people to rethink how they engage with culture. One participant to the online focus group said:

'Attending the larger theatres has become quite expensive, I've started to look for cheaper things to do now, and you discover other theatres and concerts and pubs that have live music and that aren't as expensive'

Connectivity - Of the 16% that selected other, the majority said transport and connectivity was a main barrier. Responses included:

'Transport especially at night is no good.'

Covid-19 - There were also comments from respondents around feelings of safety due to Covid-19:

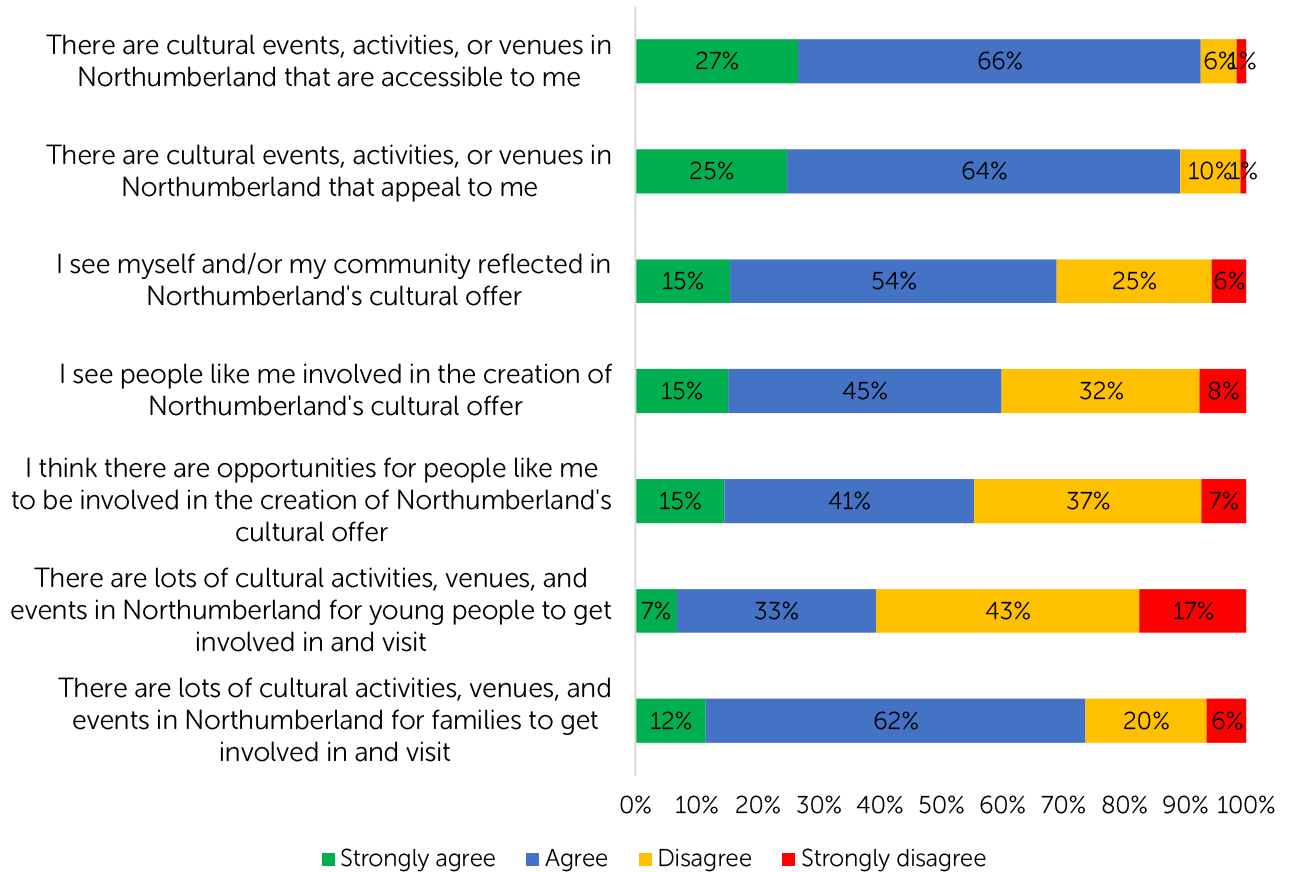
'We still prefer to avoid large crowds and indoor events currently due to high covid numbers plus lack of covid measures in most venues.'

Some participants at the focus group in Berwick mentioned Covid-19 being a main barrier to accessing culture in Northumberland. Several participants mentioned that they now travel across the border to access cultural events & venues as the perception is Scotland is safer than England due to the higher take up of mask wearing and the increased level of restrictions in Scotland.

Perceptions of Northumberland's Cultural Offer

Through the online survey we gathered data relating to people's perceptions of Northumberland's cultural offer. Gardens, Historic/Heritage Sites, and Theatres and Museums all scored highly.

In addition to this, we also provided respondents with a series of statements relating to Northumberland's cultural offer, and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with those statements:



We asked those who disagreed with the statement 'there are opportunities for people like me to be involved in the creation of Northumberland's cultural offer' for more information. There were three reoccurring themes:

Lack of free time - The first was around people having the free time to volunteer or get involved, one respondent wrote:

'A lot of opportunities are volunteer based therefore are only accessible for those who have time / money. I feel a lot of retired people are able to engage whereas young people have to work.'

Lack of awareness - The second theme was focused on the challenge of raising awareness of the available opportunities for local people. Responses included:

'I'm not aware of what might be available locally.'

'I haven't come across any opportunities.'

Accessibility and Inclusivity - Finally, the last theme focused on accessibility & inclusivity. Comments included:

'Accessibility is a very real issue for people with mobility issues.'

'As a Black Woman, without a car and particular health issues, I do not see anything aimed at people like me, or that reflects my life in general.'

'Working Class people have no seat at the culture table.'

'There's no Queer representation for families.'