



THE NATIONAL ARTS & CULTURAL EDUCATION AWARDS | 2026

Award Categories & Nomination Process

Guidance for Applicants



With
**Curious
Minds**

About these Awards

The National Arts and Cultural Education Awards is a biennial event which shines a light on best practice, innovation and activism in the field of creative and cultural education, wherever it is happening across the country.

We know from evidence and experience that when children and young people take part in arts and culture they do better in school and are happier and healthier. Every child deserves to grow up surrounded by a wealth of creative opportunities. The mission of these awards is to celebrate the incredible, passionate people – teachers, artists and creative practitioners, youth and social workers, health and wellbeing specialists and community volunteers – who are working hard to make this ambition a reality.

As a four-time organiser of the North West and Northern Cultural Education Awards, **Curious Minds is delighted this year to be inviting nominations from across the whole of the UK, including Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.** With sustained investment and the confidence to innovate, the arts and cultural education sector can operate as a driving force in shaping a fairer, more creative and more prosperous UK, one where every child and young person has the opportunity to thrive and realise their full potential.

Award Categories

We're inviting nominations across 10 Award Categories, celebrating the breadth, diversity and brilliance of practice in our sector. You'll find a summary of each category below, with detailed guidance on the nomination questions and assessment criteria later in this document.

The Arts Leadership in Education Award ([jump to this category](#))

*This award celebrates a **school** which has developed and embedded an outstanding arts, creativity and cultural offer to deliver transformational outcomes for pupils, staff and/or community.*

The Inspirational Local Partnership Award ([jump to this category](#))

*This award recognises a **place-based partnership** that has worked together to improve access to arts, culture and creativity for the children and young people in their area.*

The Innovators in Engagement Award ([jump to this category](#))

*This new award recognises an **individual, team or organisation** that has led the way in transforming participation and engagement practice which delivers meaningful benefits and lasting change for young people.*

The Mighty Roots Award ([jump to this category](#))

*Recognises an excellent **grassroots creative organisation**, whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the cultural and creative life of children and families in their local community.*

The Fearless Freelancer Award ([jump to this category](#))

Honours a **teaching artist** whose commitment to working creatively with children and young people demonstrates excellence in pedagogy and practice.

The One-to-Watch Award ([jump to this category](#))

This award recognises the **next generation of leaders** in arts education and cultural learning, shining a spotlight on **emerging talent at the start of a career** dedicated to advocating for high-quality arts and culture for children and young people.

The Young Arts Activism Award ([jump to this category](#))

This award celebrates a **group of young people** (the majority of whom are aged under 21) or an individual, that has led creative action to drive a difference in the world around them.

The Spark the Change Award ([jump to this category](#))

This award acknowledges the use of arts and culture for social change. It will recognise a **targeted project or programme** which tackles an issue or barrier directly, using arts and culture as a tool to ultimately improve the lives of children and young people.

The Power in Practice Award ([jump to this category](#))

This category recognises **large organisations** whose scale and reach give them significant influence across the arts and cultural sector, including through their relationships with partners, freelancers, communities and the wider creative ecosystem. It celebrates organisations that use this influence responsibly and effectively, through fair commissioning, shared decision-making, support for smaller organisations, and the adoption of practices that create lasting impact beyond individual projects.

The Changemaker Award ([jump to this category](#))

This person's vision and outstanding contribution will have raised the bar, pioneered new and inclusive practice, improved the conditions for the workforce - or all three. Their influence will have had a ripple effect throughout the sector, and their work will be easily recognised as an important part of its history. **This is the only category for which people cannot nominate themselves!**

Nominations Process FAQs

1. When can I submit nominations?/When is the deadline?

Award nominations will open on Wednesday 4th March 2026. The deadline for submissions is midday (12:00pm) on Monday 1st June 2026. No late entries will be accepted.

2. What does it cost to nominate?

There is no cost to make an awards nomination, it is completely free!

However, please be aware that there will be a nominal fee for attendance at the Awards Ceremony, which will take place on the afternoon of Wednesday 21st October 2026. Individual tickets will cost £20.

The event will be a fantastic opportunity to celebrate, network and enjoy the company of people working in a similar field. We'd encourage anyone supporting or involved in arts and cultural learning to attend.

3. Can I nominate myself/my project?

Yes, absolutely! You can nominate for yourself or for somebody else (with their permission). There is only one category that we ask you not to nominate yourself in, which is the Changemaker Award.

4. Can I nominate the same person/project in several categories?

Of course! There's no need to restrict yourself to just one category but it's important to remember that you must complete a nomination form for each separate category.

5. How do I submit a nomination?

Each of the award categories has a separate online nomination form. Links to these forms are provided on the [National Arts and Cultural Education Awards](#) page of our website.

Later in this document you will find the nomination form questions for each category, as well as the assessment criteria by which it will be shortlisted and judged. We would encourage you to use this information to pre-prepare your nomination. It isn't possible to save the online form mid-way through completion.

6. I have access needs which mean I will struggle to complete an online form. Are there other options?

Yes. We're very keen to ensure you're able to submit nominations using an alternative format (such as video or audio) if you need to. Please contact us via helen.brady@curiousminds.org.uk to discuss how we can help.

7. When will you announce shortlisted finalists?

Shortlisted finalists will be announced on or shortly after 5th September 2026 on our website and social media channels. All submissions will receive an email to confirm if your nomination has been shortlisted or not.

It's worth being aware that we will ask shortlisted finalists to provide us with some photos, videos or audio clips related to their project/nomination. Nothing too onerous, and we will provide further guidance if this applies to you.

8. How will the categories be judged?

For each category (with the exception of the Changemaker Award) we will be convening a judging panel of three. Two of these people will be external to and independent of Curious Minds. The panel will read all nominations for the category and will score them with reference to the published assessment criteria.

The Change Maker Award winner will be chosen by the CEO and Chair of Curious Minds.

9. *Who can I contact if I have questions that aren't answered in this document?*

Got an outstanding question? That's fine. If you've read through this document fully and also looked at the nomination form but still need clarity, email us at helen.brady@curiousminds.org.uk. We are here to help!

The Awards Ceremony

The Awards Ceremony will take place **Wednesday October 21st, 2026, at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) in Manchester**. It will include plenty of opportunities to celebrate, reconnect or build your networks.

Questions and Assessment Criteria

Each of the award category nomination forms will include some standard questions about your entry. These include:

- Key contact name and details for the nominee
- Confirmation that the nominee gives permission to be contacted
- Name and contact details of nominator (if these are different from the nominee)
- Data processing consent

In addition, the forms will ask you a unique set of questions that are specific to the category that will give you the opportunity to tell us more about your project or person. These answers will be what we use to assess your entry.

All the submission questions and assessment criteria for each category are provided below to help you plan your submission.

The Arts Leadership in Education Award

*This award celebrates a **school** which has developed and embedded an outstanding arts, creativity and cultural offer to deliver transformational outcomes for pupils, staff and/or community.*

Assessment Criteria

- **Pioneering and transformational** – has the setting used innovative methods to deliver transformational change for pupils, staff and school community?
- **Impact** – has there been a substantial impact in one or more areas of strategic planning and/or delivery using arts, creativity and culture?
- **Legacy** – has this work led to embedded and sustainable outcomes, which will continue to serve the school community in the long term?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please describe the innovative approach the school took to embedding an outstanding arts, creativity and culture offer across the setting. *(up to 200 words)*
2. Tell us about the specific needs, goals or gaps the school was seeking to tackle, and how your approach addressed this. *(up to 200 words)*
3. What impact has this work had on: a) the pupils b) the staff c) your wider school community? *(up to 200 words)*
4. How will the impact of this work be sustained long term? *(up to 200 words)*
5. Tell us how the school overcame barriers that would exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? *(up to 200 words)*

The Inspirational Local Partnership Award

This award recognises a **place-based partnership** that has worked together to improve access to arts, culture and creativity for the children and young people in their area.

Assessment Criteria

- **Place-based** – how has this work responded to local need and context?
- **Impact** – what difference has this partnership made to their area? What is the lasting impact of their work?
- **Partners** – how has the partnership ensured the right voices are involved in their decision making, and how have they worked together in a quality and innovative way?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please tell us about your partnership, where it's located, and who the partners are? Why did these specific partners come together? *(up to 200 words)*
 2. What are the specific needs your work is addressing? How did you identify these? *(up to 200 words)*
 3. Who has benefitted from your partnership's activities? What difference have you made for children and young people? *(up to 200 words)*
 4. How will the impact of this work be sustained long term? *(up to 200 words)*
 5. Tell us about how your work challenges the barriers that exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? *(up to 200 words)*
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The Innovators in Engagement Award

*This new award recognises an **individual, team or organisation** that has led the way in transforming participation and engagement practice which delivers meaningful benefits and lasting change for young people.*

Assessment Criteria

- **Innovation** – what new way of working has the person, team or organisation pioneered?
- **Reach** – how has this increased their impact on children and young people, or changed who they engage with?
- **Influence** – how has their practice influenced others, beyond their own direct work?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please provide us with a brief overview of your arts and cultural work with young people. We're interested to know how your practice has developed, where you took initiative, tested new ways of working or went above or beyond. *(up to 200 words)*
2. Please provide an example of how your approach delivered tangible impact for children and young people. How did you ensure the experience was meaningful, inclusive and led to a positive outcome? This could be an example of impact on a group or an individual. *(up to 200 words)*
3. Please tell us how this work changed things for the better. This might include how it influenced your own practice, or the changed approach of your organisation. *(up to 200 words)*
4. Please tell us how will the impact of this work will be sustained or influenced cultural education beyond your organisation? This might include how you work in partnership with others, or how you have shared your knowledge with others. *(up to 200 words)*
5. Please tell us about how this work challenges the barriers that exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? This might include how barriers are identified, addressed or reduced. *(up to 200 words)*

The Mighty Roots Award

*Recognises an excellent **grassroots creative organisation**, whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the cultural and creative life of children and families in their local community.*

Eligibility note:

We appreciate that 'grassroots' is a term is often used but seldom defined – other than a general understanding that it refers to activity that is small scale and community focussed. Basically, you know your organisation and work best, so we're happy to let you decide whether your organisation qualifies. However, if you're still unsure, please use these characteristics as a guide:

Size: We would expect grassroots organisations to have small staff teams of around 5 or fewer (not including volunteers).

Community: We see grassroots organisations as being born from and uniquely rooted within their community.

Turnover: Your funding may come from several different sources but it's likely that your annual turnover will be less than £150,000.

Assessment Criteria

- **Quality** – how do they strive for quality in all aspects of their work
- **Resilience** – how have they innovatively sustained a small organisation, and adapted to the needs of their community?
- **Impact** – what difference has this organisation made to their community? What is the lasting impact of their work?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Provide a brief overview of the grassroots organisation, its purpose and role in the local community. *(up to 200 words)*
2. Please share some examples of how the work of the organisation ensures that children and young people have access to high quality arts and culture. *(up to 200 words)*
3. How do activities address and respond to local need or gaps? How are projects and funding sources developed to ensure this is the case? *(up to 200 words)*
4. How will the impact of this work be sustained long term? *(up to 200 words)*
5. Tell us about how the organisation challenges the barriers that exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? *(up to 200 words)*

The Fearless Freelancer Award

Honours a **teaching artist** whose commitment to working creatively with children and young people demonstrates excellence in pedagogy and practice.

Eligibility note:

To be nominated in this category, you should meet the following criteria:

Be registered as self-employed. We recognise that some people also work freelance part-time and there are many different ways to have a freelance career. Have done freelance work for 2 years or more. Have an active portfolio demonstrated through work with more than one client/organisation (for example, multiple contracts/projects rather than a single employed post). Undertake work which prioritises children and young people.

We will assume the freelancer has a portfolio career. A portfolio career is one that incorporates a range of different roles/employers rather than one full-time position.

Assessment Criteria

- **Quality** – how do they strive for quality in all aspects of their work e.g. strong pedagogy, thoughtful planning, creative ambition, reflective practice, and evidence of positive outcomes for children and young people.
- **Resilience** – how have you met the challenges of sustaining a freelance career? A sustained practice over time, decision-making under pressure, ethics, courage, adaptability.
- **Practice** – how have you innovated your practice and pedagogy? New approaches, inventive formats, partnership working, and learning that clearly improves the work you deliver.

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please give a brief overview of your work in arts, creativity and culture so far. Please give examples of who you have worked with/for. *(up to 200 words)*
2. Please share some examples of how you ensure children and young people have access to high quality arts and culture through your work. This could be based on what you do yourself, collaborative projects with others and/or within organisations. *(up to 200 words)*
3. Tell us about how you develop your own creativity. Think about any professional or creative development you have undertaken to keep you up to date with practice in your creative field. *(up to 200 words)*
4. Freelance work can involve uncertainty, uneven income, risk and challenge. How did you keep yourself going as a freelancer through a difficult period (for example COVID, gaps in work, cancellations or funding changes) while still

delivering high-quality experiences for children and young people? *(up to 200 words)*

5. Tell us about how your work challenges the barriers that exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? *(up to 200 words)*

The One-to-Watch Award

*This award champions the next generation of leaders in arts education and cultural learning by recognising **someone taking their early steps in a career** that champions high-quality arts and culture for children and young people.*

Assessment Criteria

- **Leadership & Changemaker Potential** – how has their early career demonstrated potential for leadership?
- **Advocacy** – how have they championed the importance of arts and culture opportunities for children and young people?
- **Action** – what have they done to improve arts and culture opportunities for children and young people?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please provide us with a brief overview of your work in cultural education so far, including any leadership experience. This might be leading a project, event, or team – whatever leadership looks like for you. Reflect on where you took the initiative, sought out learning or development opportunities, or went above and beyond. *(up to 200 words)*
2. Please give an example of how you ensure children and young people have access to high quality arts and culture through your work. Tell us where you showed leadership characteristics e.g. resilience, courage, solutions-focus, or learning from setbacks. *(up to 200 words)*
3. Please tell us about a time that you have championed the role that arts and culture plays in enriching the lives of children and young people. This might include influencing others, challenging assumptions, or going beyond your comfort zone. *(up to 200 words)*
4. What one change do you want to see in arts education and cultural learning, and why? Reflect on the values that underpin your view and how this change would improve outcomes for children and young people. *(up to 200 words)*
5. Tell us about how your work challenges the barriers that exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? *(up to 200 words)*

The Young Arts Activism Award

This award celebrates a **group of young people** (the majority of whom are aged under 21) or an **individual**, that has led creative action to drive a difference in the world around them.

Eligibility note (for application guidance):

We recognise that groups of young people rarely undertake collective action without the support and supervision of responsible adults. We actively invite nomination forms submitted by an adult on behalf of a group of young people in their care. You can either prepare the entry with them or submit it on their behalf but please ensure that you have their permission to do so, and that you are able to demonstrate that their activities have been predominantly self-directed.

Assessment Criteria

- **Impact** – what impact did the creative action have on the people or places that benefitted? How sustainable is the impact long-term?
- **Innovation and Risk Taking** – how innovative and creative was the project? Were creative risks taken?
- **Agents of Change** – how did the group demonstrate that they are self-motivated and have motivated others? Or how has the work been genuinely driven by young people and removed barriers for other young people to participate in arts and culture?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please tell us about this group/individual and the work/activities for which they are being nominated. (up to 200 words)
2. What change has been brought about through their work/activities? What risks have been taken to bring about that change? (up to 200 words)
3. How has arts and creativity been an integral part of this work? (up to 200 words)
4. How will the impact of this work be sustained long term? (up to 200 words)
5. Tell us about how this work challenges the barriers that exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? (up to 200 words)

The Spark the Change Award

This award celebrates the use of arts and culture for social change. It will recognise a **targeted project or programme** which tackles an issue or barrier directly, using arts and culture as a tool to ultimately improve the lives of children and young people.

Assessment Criteria

- **Innovation** – how were the arts used as a vehicle for social change?
- **Impact** – what changed and who benefited?
- **Sustainability** – how will the positive benefits be sustained beyond the life of the project?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please describe the project or programme. What issue, challenge, or barrier were you seeking to address, and why was this important for the children and young people involved? *(up to 200 words)*
2. How did you use arts and culture as a tool for social change? What was innovative about your approach, and how did the creative process help address the issue or barrier identified? *(up to 200 words)*
3. What impact has this work had on: a) children and young people b) your staff or participating freelance teaching artists/ practitioners c) the wider community? Please include any evidence, feedback, or examples that demonstrate positive social change. *(up to 200 words)*
4. How will the impact of this work be sustained long term? *(up to 200 words)*
5. Tell us about how this project overcame challenges and barriers that exclude some young people from participating in arts and culture? *(up to 200 words)*

The Power in Practice Award

*This category recognises **large organisations** whose scale and reach give them significant influence across the arts and cultural sector, including through their relationships with partners, freelancers, communities and the wider creative ecosystem. It celebrates organisations that use this influence responsibly and effectively, through fair commissioning, shared decision-making, support for smaller organisations, and the adoption of practices that create lasting impact beyond individual projects.*

Assessment Criteria

- **Quality** – how strong is the learning and participation work itself?
- **Responsibility** – how responsibly does the organisation use its power?
- **Influence/Ecosystem Impact** – how does the organisation strengthen the wider sector?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Please give a brief overview of your organisation's learning and participation work with children and young people over the last two years. What needs, gaps, or barriers were you aiming to address? Please include examples of

programmes delivered and who they were delivered with/for (schools, communities, partners). *(up to 200 words)*

2. Tell us what lasting difference/impact your organisation creates beyond individual projects. What has changed in your organisation's practice or in the wider ecosystem as a result of evidence, reflection, or learning? For example, you may wish to talk about systemic change over time, including any best-practice or next-practice approaches you have taken to reduce barriers or inequities. Please include one clear example of impact and the evidence you used (feedback, evaluation, outcomes data, testimonials, learning captured). *(up to 200 words)*
3. Large organisations can set the tone for the sector. Please share examples of how you use your influence to commission and work fairly with freelancers and partners. You may include your approach to pay, contracting, expenses, crediting, safeguarding/duty of care, and prompt payment. You may want to talk about inclusion and how you support equitable access to opportunity. *(up to 200 words)*
4. Tell us how you share decision-making with partners and communities, including children and young people where appropriate. What decisions are genuinely shared (not just consulted on), and can you give one example where shared decision-making changed what you did? *(up to 200 words)*
5. Tell us how your organisation strengthens the wider ecosystem beyond individual projects. This could include supporting smaller organisations or grassroots partners to thrive and lead, multi-year relationships, capacity-building, resource sharing, co-commissioning, or sharing learning openly. What will be sustained long term, and how do you know? *(up to 200 words)*

The Changemaker Award

This person's vision and outstanding contribution will have raised the bar, pioneered new and inclusive practice, improved the conditions for the workforce - or all three. Their influence will have had a ripple effect throughout the sector, and their work will be easily recognised as an important part of its history.

Eligibility note:

This is the only category for which people cannot nominate themselves. The recipient of this award will be chosen by the CEO and Chair of Curious Minds, but we are still keen to hear your suggestions. For these reasons, there are fewer questions on the nomination form.

Assessment Criteria

- **Impact** – To what extent has their work had a significant positive impact on the field of cultural education?

Qualitative Nomination Questions

1. Who do you think should receive this award?
2. What have they done that motivated you to suggest them?
3. How does their work challenge the barriers that exclude some people from participating in arts and culture?