Chorlton Arts Festival: Review 2024[1]



Mural: Chris Moore

A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience[2]

Summary of the 2024 Festival

The 2024 Chorlton Arts Festival took place from 17th-26th May 2024. Across 10 days, 147 separate events were showcased in 46 different venues, produced by over 300 local artists and supported by a team of 30 volunteers. The Festival was organised by a committee of 14 local residents, who each lent support to build and maintain key partnerships for the Festival as well as programme, promote and produce elements of the festival itself. The festival cost £4175 which was funded through local sponsorship, donations and the Co-op Local Community Fund. The majority of events in the festival programme were free, providing access to local cultural activities to residents regardless of income.

[1] This report was prepared by Natalie Hillman and Carolyn Kagan

[2] Ingold, T. (2011). *The Perception of the Environment*. 2 ed. Oxon: Routledge

Initial Reflections

Following last year's Festival review, we aimed to increase the volume of feedback collected at events. Volunteers made a concerted effort to encourage audiences to fill in feedback forms which increased engagement, resulting in around 320 audience feedback forms being completed[3].That said, organisers did not assume that feedback forms would provide fully representative data and thus this was not the only approach taken to evaluating the impact of the festival. 49% of events were stewarded by volunteers who regularly recorded observations of audience numbers and reactions, as well as comments about the events. Feedback from visitors, artists and from venue hosts was obtained through an online questionnaire and email feedback. Artists' social media also attracted feedback from visitors.

Following the Festival, organisers and volunteers held two review meetings to discuss the feedback, gather further comments and share insights into how the Festival went. Overall, the diverse forms of feedback and reflection were useful as they provided a framework for organisers to consider who is engaging with the Festival and what experiences they had. In this report, we will draw on the feedback and discussions to highlight some key themes and reflect on the Festival.

People and Place

> *it is a fantastic local event, and a great way to meet new people, and connect with others that you know already* (Venue host)

In recent years, the arts and cultural sector has been increasingly tied to concepts of placemaking and the idea that cultural activities may produce a sense of place or belonging. We see acknowledgement for these impacts directly in the funding decisions of *Arts Council England*[4]. Yet these results are also prevalent in more grassroots activities. Brownett and Evans[5] argue that community festivals '*have the potential to bring people together, and that these gatherings can positively influence our perceptions of the world around us*'. They also state that arts festivals '*provide an opportunity for conversations about how the community are perceived or perceive themselves*'. Thus, cultural activities and arts festivals may reflect and indeed shape the character of a community and place. This, then, provides a lens through which to view some of this year's activity and impact data.

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[3]Full report of the questionnaire feedback by Gareth Roberts available at https://chorltonartsfestival.org/review-of-the-2024-chorlton-arts-festival/

[4]The *Creative People and Places* scheme for example. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places-0

[5]Brownett, T and Evans, O. (2020). 'Finding Common Ground: The Conception of Community Arts Festivals as spaces for Placemaking', *Health & Place*, 61(102254), pp. 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.10225 pp 7,14

In doing this, we can open and begin to answer questions about the ways in which Chorlton Arts Festival characterises the area and consider what people, place and art looks like in Chorlton.

People



Some of the 2024 Festival Volunteers

> *Fantastic festival celebrating the creativity and community of Chorlton. It's more important now than ever that we all step away from our busy lives and take the time to come together to engage with the arts and connect with one another.* (Artist feedback)

The Festival aims to provide a space for people of all ages to experience art with a range of activities such as family fun days and workshops in the day, and poetry or music events in the evening. Events were attended by anywhere from 4 to 200 people, with some events lending themselves towards a more intimate audience and others bringing lots of people together. The Festival saw an increase in volunteers and their input this year. More volunteers were on the organising team and volunteers in general were actively involved in stewarding more events than usual, as well as contributing to publicity, social media and radio communications.

> *I attended lots of events last year and – I just wanted to be a part of it!* (New volunteer)

> *I really enjoyed the festival, and it was a great way for me to get to know Chorlton more! ... I'll be sure to be involved again next year! (*New Volunteer)

Feedback about the organisation of the Festival was positive with different artists reporting that committee members, volunteers and venue hosts were, with few exceptions, *positive, supportive, generous, helpful, responsive and well organised.*

Visitors, whether local or from further afield, reported the Festival to be *warm, welcoming, friendly and open* and two under 18s said the Festival had *A family feel*

with *great atmosphere and energy. .*One visitor (age 36-45) said in written feedback*, I've met people at the different events which is nice since I'm fairly new to the area*.

Audience feedback forms were predominantly completed by an older age group with 54% of those completing the forms being over 56 compared to only 3% being between 19-25. Through other forms of feedback, we know more young people were involved in the Festival this year with events in the parks, teen rock nights; schools' programmes and family fun days being well attended and received.

Volunteers also noted that some events, particularly music and dance events, were well attended by younger people. Many of those events focused on attracting families with young children were in outdoor spaces like parks and these were clearly popular and enjoyable – even if it was harder to encourage filling in feedback forms. Likewise, more popular music and dance events, perhaps involving standing or dancing in a bar environment, found that encouraging participants to fill in feedback forms was less fruitful. Nevertheless, in Festival review meetings, several volunteers commented on how popular youth events were this year.

> *When I looked round the room and it was full of youngsters having a ball – it was fantastic (*Event steward*)*

Looking forward to 2025 there was a sense that capitalising on this and building young people's performances into an annual calendar outside of the Festival week may offer an opportunity for the Festival to expand and establish further community impact.

Place



Word Cloud prepared from written feedback (Gareth Roberts)

> *It's a wonderful, inclusive, vibrant, inspiring art event for the community to get involved with in so many ways*. (Artist Feedback)

46 venues took part in the Arts Festival this year, with the majority, 40, being returning venues from the 2023 festival. Overall, 6 churches and 13 cafes/bars took part and there were events in 6 parks or outdoor spaces, some dispersed around Chorlton. Some events took place in artists' own homes.

In working across these venues, the Festival offers opportunities for people to encounter new spaces in Chorlton or see new things in familiar spaces. One of the key themes in the feedback was that the Festival encouraged people to visit new spaces with attendees commenting that they enjoyed visiting new venues and it made them go somewhere other than their local, or into Manchester.

> *I got to explore Chorlton* (Festival visitor, age under18)

> *It's my first year in Chorlton and it's made me go places I'd never been to before and really experience Chorlton* (Festival visitor, age 26-35)

> *I've never visited Chorlton before. I'm glad I did and I would like to come back* (Festival visitor, age 26-35)

These introductions to space through Festival activities unlock new possibilities for residents regarding their perception of place, serving to characterise, and in some cases even re-characterise, the landscape at a local level. Brownett and Evans[6] highlight this impact in saying '*through the reimagining and repurposing of space, community festivals have huge potential to create new (or renewed) physical and emotional connections, which might lead to generating a sense of belonging by changing our perspectives*'.

> *Community based events promote local artists and businesses. Watching shows in these spaces feels special* (Festival visitor, age 36-45)

So how might presenting cultural activities in venues across Chorlton impact sense of place? The Festival promoted positive perceptions of the area with 85% of attendees giving feedback agreeing that the festival makes Chorlton a better place and has a positive impact on well-being, community connections and knowledge of Chorlton.

> *[The Festival} absolutely [makes Chorlton a better place} - It's had a huge impact on me and my well-being which will have a knock on effect on those around me* (Festival visitor, age 36-45)

In terms of how the Festival influenced people's perceptions of place, when asked in feedback forms to comment on the ways in which *Chorlton Arts Festival* makes Chorlton a better place, audiences commented that the Festival 'creates community' and showcases 'creativity' and 'talent'. Many also suggested that the Festival promotes 'diverse experiences' and 'togetherness' or leads them to view Chorlton as a 'friendly place'. These comments further illustrate the Festival's positive impact on

[6]Op cit *Common Ground*, 2020:15

community cohesion and well-being as well as characterising Chorlton as a creative hub that is both distinctive and varied.

> *I had a free evening and due to a bit of social media advertising I have had access to all the lovely local arts and performances scattered around my doorstep. Wonderful.* (Festival visitor, age 19-25)

> *[The Festival] attracts visitors to the area to spend money and benefit the venues and other businesses. Brings all ages together* (Festival visitor, age 56+)

> *Art brings communities closer and the Festival lets Chorlton show off the talent it harbours* (Festival visitor, age 56+)

> *[The Festival] promotes inclusion and opens local venues to people (*Festival visitor, age 46-55)

Artists



> *It's a wonderful, diverse, inclusive, vibrant, inspiring art event for the community to get involved with in so many ways.* (Artist feedback)

The Festival offers opportunities for a range of creatives to present their work, whether they are professional artists or hobby-based creatives. This year we had over 160 applications to join the Festival, with some applications being from groups of artists – including drama groups, visual arts groups, music groups, and three community choirs. 6 schools took part (4 primary and 2 high schools). This means well over 300 local artists took part in the Festival.

There was a range of contributions from young people throughout, from performances at our launch party from Chorlton High School students to three nights of teen rock bands and some visual; art exhibitions across Chorlton. Older people took part too – as individual performers but also as part of groups including a theatre

group, a visual art group and a craft group. The diverse range of events presented as part of the Festival with artists of all abilities, were highlighted in feedback, and key positives for audiences included:

- *'The range of different artists and shows'*
- *'The diversity of events in local, small venues'*
- *'The promotion of young people and their talents'*
- *'The range of ages from primary school children to elders'*
- *'The mixture of professional artists and ad hoc amateurs'*

Across all disciplines we saw new artists, returning artists and community groups performing and/or leading workshops enabling wider members of the community to participate. Of those artists who completed formal feedback forms, 62% of artists this year were returning artists and 39% were taking part in the Festival for the first time indicating that the Arts Festival has been able to able to strike a balance between attracting new artists to participate and maintaining relationships with artists and community groups to encourage them to return.

In terms of artistic medium, music and visual arts were the most popular art forms during the Festival. Approximately 45% of events were music events whether that be traditional folk tunes, indie-rock or experimental electronic music. Music events also suggested a sense of cultural diversity in the area with the Festival featuring several genres from across the globe such as traditional flamenco, Cuban, afro-Brazilian and Latin guitar music.

> *Audience members said they enjoyed hearing new styles of music they had never encountered before and praised the friendly, community vibe of the Festival* (Artist feedback)

In visual arts, 27 creatives shared their work at the Grand Art exhibition and 10 at our craft show and there were a number of art and craft displays across Chorlton, taking people to places they might not otherwise visit.

> *It was good that people came to events in the church that normally would not see inside* (Venue host)

A hyper local festival like the Chorlton Arts Festival has a positive impact on artists taking part as well as on visitors.

> *Older members [artists] who took part really enjoyed it and it boosted their confidence and made them feel good.* (Artist feedback)
>
> *It was really fun, community oriented, and a great opportunity to meet other artists .(Artist feedback)*
>
> *I would definitely recommend the Festival for other artists - it's a great opportunity for making connections. After performing at the Festival, audience*

members always come up asking to hire me for other events so it opens doors. (Artist Feedback)

Artists formed good relationships with other artists taking part, and some have continued to meet up after the Festival.

It's great to take part in and there is a great atmosphere of camaraderie amongst the artists taking part (Artist Feedback)

Storytelling through cultural activities



The events I went to made me think about who I am and what it means to belong in Chorlton (Festival volunteer)

In looking at the events in the 2024 programme, it is perhaps interesting to examine common themes and threads in storytelling across multiple mediums. Indeed, this may be useful for thinking about what narratives cultural activities tell us about Chorlton. Doreen Massey[7], draws this connection stating space is the '*simultaneity of stories so far*'. Considering the Arts Festival through this lens, we may ask what stories were being told during the Festival and what narrative does the Festival begin to shape about place?

Across the literary arts and workshop portions of the programme, many of the artists focused on sharing personal narratives of identity and self-discovery. This was apparent in both community storytelling events and poetry nights, in which participants and artists shared insights into both the challenges and joys experienced in their lives so far.

[7]Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd p.1

> *It's always amazing to learn something new and feel glad about what you already know* (Festival visitor, age 45-55)

This was also a pattern seen in performance and drama events. In some cases, community groups used theatrical techniques to share their personal reflections and stories through performance. Some artists took a slightly different approach and led events which captured the personal reflections of their audience, for example through creating a workshop space that invited participants to respond to prompts. In these events, participants were invited to share a range of experiences from funny stories to thoughts on queer culture or ideas of what home means. Through these events, artists both told stories which touched on themes of identity and sense of belonging and offered opportunities for participants to reflect on their own stories too.

> *I can't tell you how great that was – it really set me thinking and I didn't think it would when I went in. It's given me lots of ideas for taking this forward* (Workshop participant)

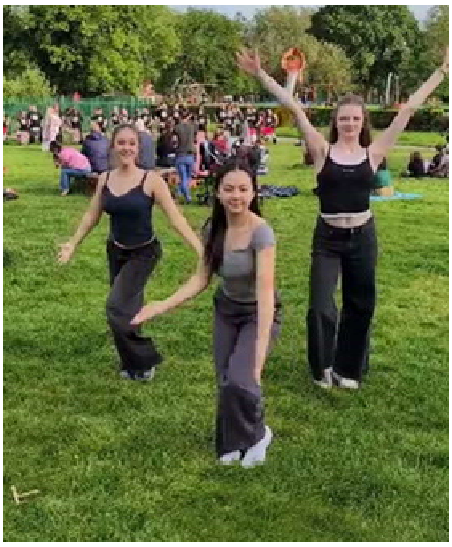
The environment featured as a thread through different parts of the programme. This was demonstrated in events like fun days in Chorlton Park or Field of Os which seemingly tapped into a desire for audiences to spend time in nature. At the same time, visual arts events showcased many artists who were inspired by nature. Some events went further in their focus on the environment by using art, particularly songs and craft, to talk about the climate and social action. In doing this, artists constructed a narrative of care for the environment and demonstrated a desire to communicate or provide opportunities for members of the community to engage with this on a deeper level.

> *I was looking at [the craftwork] - placed in a bicycle shop of all places - and it really did make me think about the world we live in* (Festival visitor, age 26-35)

> *The underwater craft work made by young people drew attention to both the beauty of nature and the shame of its destruction* (Festival volunteer)

Identity and self-exploration, and the environment, are just some of the patterns identified in this year's Festival programme. Certainly, if we wanted to extrapolate this further, we would likely be able to identify and discover other common themes in the stories shared across both this year and previous years of the Festival. This emphasises that, before even looking at feedback data, the programming of cultural activities itself has potential to offer reflections surrounding what narratives the Arts Festival constructs about people and place in Chorlton.

Communicating a sense of place



Gecko film 'The Chorlston' with Zoe Solanki dancers

> *Comm's and publicity were better this year. Volunteers did local radio interviews; Facebook and Instagram were brilliant. We need more coverage in the run up though* (Volunteer feedback)

It is also worth thinking about what role social media and the online presence of the Festival plays in producing or communicating both the identity of the organisation and a sense of place. This year the Festival brought in new sponsorship from Gecko who works in partnership with Southway Housing Trust. Gecko's involvement in marketing and documenting the Festival through their own videography helped to strengthen the social media presence of the Festival. Gecko's content[8] emphasised creativity as an important tool in building communities, suggesting that the Arts Festival offers a key opportunity to be part of the community. In doing this, their content presented Chorlton as a vibrant and creative place and pitched a narrative in which *Chorlton Arts Festival* contributes to making Chorlton a place 'Where you'll want to live'. Their involvement here as sponsors beyond the purely financial also helped to highlight to the organisation how sponsorship can be used not only to fund the Festival but further shape positive cultural narratives about the area[9]. In the review meeting, both committee members and volunteers commented on how the work contributed by Gecko as a sponsor was outstanding.

The Chorlton Arts Festival Instagram (@chorlton.arts), regularly posted content in the lead up and during the Festival itself. Whilst there are certainly some challenges surrounding marketing a packed programme of 147 events, feedback from artists

[8]Video shorts made by Gecko and also by videographer Patrick Hanfling are available on the Festival's You Tube site https://www.youtube.com/@chorltonarts9172/videos and at Instagram @chorlton.arts .

[9]Sponsors HLFBerry introduced some acts, further bridging the gap between performance and sponsorship

suggests that largely they were satisfied with the publicity from the Festival organisers. The series '*Meet the Grand Arts Exhibition Artists'*[10] which shared short videos of artists talking about their work, was well received and garnered interest in the event. However, the Festival's social media (including Facebook and X) presence does not solely function as a vehicle to promote the Festival but serves to document the Festival too. Throughout the Festival photos and videos were shared both as posts and stories, particularly on the Instagram page, which offered insight into different events and showed audiences enjoying themselves. The Instagram posts thus serve a useful function to reinforce messaging that the Arts Festival is worth engaging with, and a perception that creativity in Chorlton is diverse. Some of the photos shared also show artists, community groups and volunteers coming together, presenting an image of collaboration and community spirit too.

The Festival also featured a virtual art gallery which offers audiences a chance to engage with an online exhibition space showcasing work of literary and visual artists. This virtual space brings together a variety of artists with opportunities to view their work and learn a bit about them. The online exhibition also shares some pieces of Chorlton's creative history with a section that highlights the street art project including the mural on the lift shaft at Chorlton Metrolink stop[11] which was completed as part of the 2023 Festival and the junction boxes around Chorlton[12].Again, the Virtual Festival contributes to an online presence which figures Chorlton as a hub of creativity.

This online presence not only helps to solidify the reputation of the Festival and say something about place during the Festival itself but, as the content remains accessible throughout the rest of the year, it continues to influence how the place is understood more widely after the Festival ends and as a result offers longevity in the impact of the Festival on sense of place.

> *Chorlton Arts Festival brings people together. Arts and music are important. We all need to enjoy free events near where we live* (Festival visitor, age 36-45) *providing an eclectic mix of joy* (Festival visitor, age 56+).

Conclusions

Amongst returning committee and volunteers, this year's Festival is felt to be the most successful yet[13].The increase in evaluation data collected was not only noted by the organisers to be positive but 'the inclusion of feedback opportunities' was noted as a positive by audiences too, suggesting evaluation processes themselves as a useful tool in reinforcing the relationship between the Arts Festival and members of the community.

[10]Created by Rodrigo Moctezuma
[11]Mural created by Caroline Daly
[12]First tranche of junction box artists include Callum Simmons, Ethan Lemon,
[13]Chorlton Civic Society has run the Chorlton Arts Festival since 2019. Prior to that, different groups organised the Festival since 2002. This comment refers to Festivals since 2019.

At the beginning, it was suggested that cultural activities like the Chorlton *Arts Festival* may contribute to a sense of place. The 2024 Festival saw a range of artists and audience members come together to share their creative interests and creative voices. In thinking about what place is, Doreen Massey's[14] view of place and stories is useful, as she states, '*Arriving in a new place means joining up with, somehow linking into, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made*'.

She consistently argues that place is about more than geographical location but rather is characterised by interactions and relationships. In the context of *Chorlton Arts Festival,* Massey's statement could be used to suggest that the Festival offers the means for audiences to 'link into' the collections of stories which constitute Chorlton as a place. In doing this, the Festival provides a platform for a variety of interactions and conversations, whether that be listening to artists share stories, meeting new people or encountering local venues. As a result, the cultural experiences the Festival offers may serve to further characterise the area and thus act as a vehicle for gaining insight into or consolidating a sense of place and community for residents who wish to be involved.

Ultimately, when viewed from this angle the *Chorlton Arts Festival,* and indeed other local arts festivals, may be a useful tool in helping to understand how cultural activity at a local level can provide a space for reflections about our sense of place and promote positive perceptions of the local area.

With thanks to:



[14]Doreen Massey, *For Space* 2005:119

Appendix 1 KISS review (Keep, Improve, Stop, Start)

During the Festival review meetings, organisers and volunteers discussed potential improvements and amendments to the Festival for next year, below is a summary of key points discussed:

Keep	**Improve**
Full range of events, mostly free to attend with the current focus on inclusivity and on the locality of Chorlton	Further streamline organisation Tighter guidance for artists' applications re text required and days available Attract more events featuring more than one art form such as dance and drawing; poetry and painting More publicity in run up and during Festival; more people doing social media; and more programmes available during the Festival and left in venues. A more central hub for holding publicity materials Variety of ways of obtaining and recording feedback from audiences, artists and venues. Increase funding through sponsorship and donation buckets at events
Start	**Consider stopping**
Introduce a young people's strand to the Festival with events throughout the year running up to the main Festival. Involve Gecko Find different ways of addressing young people directly to increase youth participation Have a crafters' demonstration day Consider a strand promoting art in people's homes with trail (who to coordinate?)	Large cake in launch party – it doesn't get eaten

Appendix 2: CAF 2024 Infogram[15]



[15] Thanks to Richard Miller of Pure Creative for preparing the Infogram