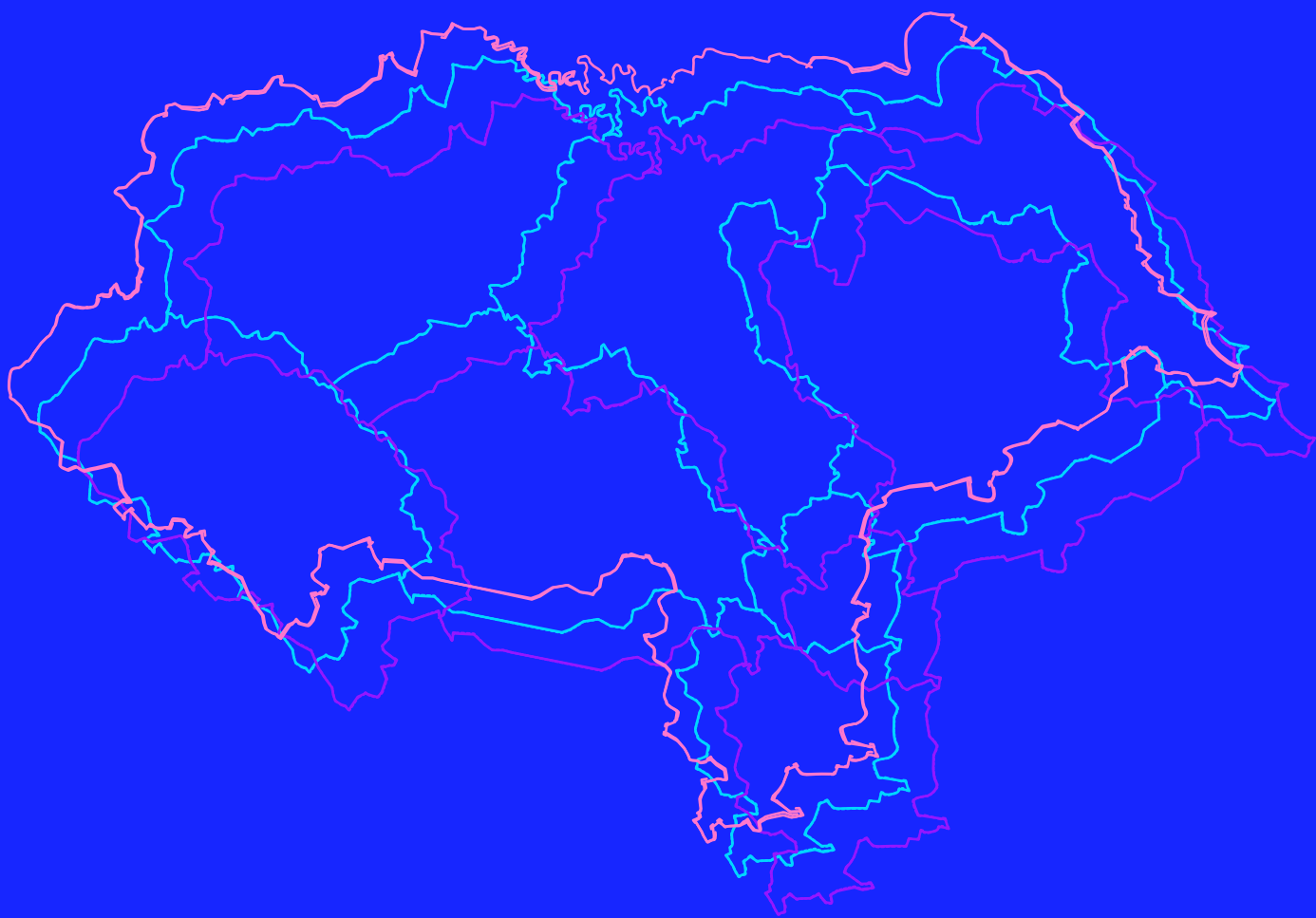


Combine/Harvest: A Digital Creativity Incubator for York and North Yorkshire



**YORK
CREATIVES**

May 2026

CONTENTS

ABOUT MEDIALE	1	SECTION 4: DIALOGUE WITH YORK AND NORTH YORKSHIRE STAKEHOLDERS	14
ABOUT YORK CREATIVES	1	Shared Vision and Strategic Objectives	
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2	– Opportunities	
SECTION 1: BRIEF, CONTEXT, METHODOLOGY	3	– Risks	
Feasibility Study Brief and Context		Impact, Scale and Legacy	
Feasibility Study Methodology		– Opportunities	
SECTION 2: NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS	5	– Risks	
National context		Physical Spaces, Infrastructure, Technical Capacity and Capabilities	
1. Digital Arts in Focus		– York: Creative Tech Hub for York and North Yorkshire	
– Arts Council England		– North Yorkshire: Creative Infrastructure & Flexible Space	
– Definition of Digital Art		– Gaps & Opportunities	
– The UK Immersive Arts programme		Key Recommendations	
2. The UK Immersive and Experience Economy		SECTION 5: PROPOSED ROUTE FORWARD	18
3. Hurdles to Growth		Concept proposal	
– Regional context		Project design, target SMEs and creatives, numbers	
SECTION 3: COMPARATOR PROJECTS	8	Principles for Combine/Harvest	
Pervasive Media Studio (Bristol, UK)		– Creating inclusive, equitable spaces	
ACMI-X (Melbourne, Australia)		– Artistic, Thematic and Aesthetic Considerations	
NEW INC (New York City, USA)		Management and communications	
		Logistics	
		– Programme Structure and Scope	
		– Participant Recruitment and Support	
		– Community Engagement and Outreach	
		– Innovation and Industry Collaboration	
		– Proposed Locations and Initial Focus	
		The model in practice	
		Planning and production timelines	
		Results, Outputs and KPIs	
		Budget	
		Political buy in/stakeholders	
		SECTION 6: FEASIBILITY REPORT SUMMARY	33

Combine/Harvest: A Digital Creativity Incubator for York and North Yorkshire

Mediale

Mediale exists to support, push forward, and develop digital arts in the UK and beyond. We do this by crafting rigorous talent development programmes for emerging artists, supporting individuals and studios with commissions and new works, and partnering with institutions looking to develop their digital offering and engagement with digital art.

All of our work is underpinned by the showcasing and development of diverse talent while creating lasting relationships, collaborations and partnerships with those who share and champion our values.

Day to day, we play a pivotal role in orchestrating the ins and outs of making things happen with artists and communities. We work as producers, advisors, curators, mentors and champions for artists in Yorkshire and nationally. Our work focuses on the intersection of art, music and technology which is woven through our practice working with artists at all levels.

Our work can be split into four pillars of often intersecting activity, Artist Development, Commissioning, Consultancy, and Place Based Partnerships, all described briefly below. Please explore our Projects page for more detailed case studies and examples of this work in action, and get in touch via info@mediale.org.uk if you'd be interested in talking to us about a possible project.

We take pride in being able to add value at any stage of a project's development. Be it a blank sheet of paper, or a delivery stage of something quite defined, we bring experience, insight and expertise.

mediale.org.uk

York Creatives

York Creatives is a community-led social enterprise incorporated in March 2025. Its mission is to champion, empower and support York's diverse creative industries and professionals at all stages of their careers. By offering structured access to creative networks and resources and delivering impactful creative projects, York Creatives enhances the creative growth, long-term economic sustainability, innovation, and inclusivity across York.

To achieve this mission in practice, York Creatives centres its activities on three pillars that help the creative sector connect, learn, and grow. It facilitates strong peer connections by hosting regular networking opportunities and social gatherings.

It drives continuous learning through professional development workshops, masterclasses and talks covering practical skills like grant writing, self-promotion, and freelance business management. It helps local creatives elevate their profiles and grow their businesses through digital resources, including podcasts, community forum platforms, and a free, searchable directory of local creative professionals.

yorkcreatives.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This feasibility study presents a fully costed and deliverable plan for Combine/Harvest, a unique digital creativity incubator designed to establish York and North Yorkshire as a global destination for cultural and heritage innovation.

The study was commissioned by the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority and delivered by Mediale in partnership with York Creatives.

The programme responds to a new opportunity to foreground the region's unique creative potential and the increasing recognition that arts and creativity are a core and necessary requirement for the generation of ideas and uses of technology that benefit society and the planet.

The region's creative industries currently contribute £790 million in Gross Value Added (GVA) annually, yet practitioners face significant barriers, including a shortage of affordable workspace, growth potential and a persistent talent leak to outside the region: for every person entering the local creative industries, 1.2 people leave.

Combine/Harvest aims to address these challenges through an initial three-year programme consisting of intensive six-month residencies strategically located across six distinct areas of the region. This rotational structure ensures maximum geographic reach and engagement across the region, countering the prevalence for creative provision concentrated in York. This initiative directly addresses the challenges outlined above by providing infrastructure and incentives that support talent retention within the region

At the heart of the incubator is a cohort of artists, creatives and other valuable minds, who will receive a £4,000 participation fee alongside technical and production support to develop advanced prototypes—early working versions of their projects to test and refine ideas. These cohorts will tackle live briefs and innovation challenges developed in collaboration with local stakeholders, ensuring that outputs have relevance and currency.

The programme is intentionally site-specific and responsive to local needs which would be designed by each cohort. For instance, the York residency could focus on digital heritage and the public realm, while Malton could prototype new solutions for creative social prescribing, and Skipton could explore immersive technology to enhance the visitor economy. By leveraging York's status as a UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts and the University of York's world-class R&D infrastructure, such as XR Stories, Combine/Harvest positions the region as a leader in creativity and the arts.

The initiative is designed to be highly visible and ambitious, acting as a calling-card for the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority's (Y&NYCA) strategic goals. It aligns directly with the Y&NYCA Local Growth Plan and the North

Yorkshire Cultural Strategy by revitalising heritage assets through technology and providing accessible cultural entitlement to nearly one million residents. Managed by Mediale, an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation, the programme at its full potential would operate on an initial three-year budget of ~£650,000, but can be scaled to higher or lower budgets. This investment covers management, delivery partners costs, participation vouchers, and a devolved Prototyping Fund for each location.

Ultimately, Combine/Harvest aims to build a sustainable and inclusive creative ecosystem that retains investment within the region, fosters self-initiated local innovation, and establishes a vibrant community of practice capable of national and international prominence.

Tom Higham, Creative Director | Mediale

Tom is Creative Director of Mediale, a digital arts commissioning organisation based in Selby, North Yorkshire. Mediale exists to support, push forward, and develop digital arts in the UK and beyond. Tom leads programmes working at the intersection of art, technology, and place, commissioning artists whose practice is embedded in that territory. Mediale operates nationally and regionally, with particular focus on immersive and critical work.

&

John Rose-Adams, Co-Director | York Creatives

John serves as Chair and Co-Director of York Creatives CIC, a community-led social enterprise dedicated to strengthening the creative industries of York. He is also Associate Director (Innovation and R&D) for XR Stories at The University of York. John's work focuses on boosting regional collaboration, fostering innovation, and positioning York and North Yorkshire as a beacon of creativity in a modern, inclusive economy.

1. BRIEF, CONTEXT, METHODOLOGY

Feasibility Study Brief and Context

This feasibility study will present a fully costed, iterated, investable and deliverable plan for the launch of Combine/Harvest, a unique digital creativity incubator for York and North Yorkshire. Our proposal is to create a 'destination' global hub for cultural and heritage innovation for York and North Yorkshire. We are taking as our inspiration some world leading best practices in heritage and cultural institutions, who have created R&D hubs, incubator spaces, and a variety of accessible, technologically capable and creative spaces attached to their institutions.

York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority commissioned digital and media arts organisation Mediale, in collaboration with York Creatives, to carry out the feasibility study, to interrogate initial concepts and to inform next steps for the project idea. The phasing of the feasibility study were as follows:

PHASE 1:

Project Initiation & Consultation Groundwork August–September 25

- ▮ **Project start**
Initial meetings to confirm scope, outcomes and deliverables
- ▮ **Concept refinement**
Assess and refine initial concepts, assumption and ambitions
- ▮ **Stakeholder mapping**
Thorough research into list of staff/ partners/stakeholders involved in the project & to speak to
- ▮ **Early engagement**
Carry out consultation with relevant partners, stakeholders and institutions on ambitions for the project
- ▮ **Interim report**
Draft analysis report of findings / recommendations

PHASE 2:

Delivery & Technical Scope October–November 25

- ▮ **Venue audit** – assess capacity and infrastructure to host
- ▮ **Dialogue with key individuals and departments to gauge:**
 - Technical scoping – requirements and affordance of different location options
 - Capacity scoping – Staffing and convening needed to deliver plans

PHASE 3:

Research December 25–January 26

- ▮ **Peer research**
Develop a list of national and international artists/companies/partners/funders/ NGOs to consult
- ▮ **Outline international case studies of best practice**
- ▮ **Interim report**
Review/sharing meeting with YNY team

PHASE 4:

Finalisation & Reporting February–April 26

- ▮ **Finalise concept & delivery strategy**
- ▮ **Produce delivery roadmap.**
This will include consideration of:
 - Planning and production timelines
 - Funding timelines and budget outlines
 - PR and Communications considerations
 - Political buy-in/support
- ▮ **Final report**
 - presentation to combined authority teams

Feasibility Study Methodology

In line with the brief we set out to interrogate the Combine/Harvest concepts and explore phases via a mix of conversations with key regional figures in the arts tech ecosystem, as well as key regional political and economic stakeholders. We supplemented these conversations with desk based research into sector documents, proposals, national programmes and prior research. One particular focus was to challenge and explore the potential, need and opportunity for the project, as well as how it would need to be made site specific and customised to each location, to consider any required divergences in approach.

Regional documents, reports and research reviewed:

- /// The Creative Industries in York and North Yorkshire: The evidence supporting our city, region and rural creative powerhouse, 2025
- /// York and North Yorkshire Creative Economy Census Technical Report, 2025
- /// York and North Yorkshire Creative Industries: Analysis of Size and Concentration, 2025
- /// Summary of data presented in the Hatch analysis of the York and North Yorkshire Creative Industries, 2025
- /// Our Creative Potential: Policy opportunities for York and North Yorkshire, 2025
- /// University of York Creative Industries Research Interests, 2025
- /// North Yorkshire Cultural Strategy, 2024

External meetings and consultation:

- /// Sophie Drury-Bradey and Rachael Drew - ARCADE – Co-directors, regional arts organisation based in Scarborough and Bridlington
- /// Sue Brandom - YNYCA – Sector Lead, Creative Industries, YNYCA
- /// Thom Feeney - Patch – Site Director, York - Patch co-working and events
- /// Hannah Turlington (Director, AHH Collective, Malton) and Robin Jackson (Director, Ryedale Creative, Malton)
- /// Selina McGonagle - Craven Arts, Skipton - Executive Lead

National documents, reports and research reviewed:

- /// Alacovska, Ana; Booth, Peter; and Fieseler, Christian. The Role of the Arts in the Digital Transformation. Artsformation (November 2020).
- /// Andersen, Kirsti Reitan; Renza, Víctor; Fieseler, Christian; McDermott, Fiona; McGannon, Róisín; and Papadopoulos, Aris. The Social and Civic Impact of the Arts. Artsformation (November 2020).
- /// Bakhshi, Hasan and Throsby, David. Culture of Innovation. Nesta (01 June 2010).
- /// British Council. Why Technology Needs Artists: 40 international perspectives. (2025).
- /// Crawford, Kate and Joler, Vladan. Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Power and Technology, 1500–2025. (2023).
- /// O’Dea, Tom; Alacovska, Ana; and Fieseler, Christian. The Role of Art in Enterprise. Artsformation (November 2020).
- /// Trigun, Nirbhay Kumar and Jain, Anjali. Artistic Innovation as a Catalyst for Corporate Creativity: Integrating Arts into Business Strategy. Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts 12 (2025): 1-17.
- /// Zolotova, Masha; Liebl, Veronika; Stocker, Gerfried; and Jandl, Markus (Eds.). SCIENCE + TECHNOLOGY + ARTS: Lessons Learned from a Decade of European Transdisciplinary Innovation. Ars Electronica / Hatje Cantz Verlag (2026).

Overall this methodology provided a rich source of information and perspectives. Inevitably there were differences and nuances in how people envisioned the idea, and the depth of programme scoping conversations were limited by the relatively short concepts presented at this stage. However the following report addresses a broad range of options for the project, an actionable and fundable launch for the project, and the contingent financial, artistic, marketing, audience and strategic implications.

2. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS

National context

1. Digital Arts in Focus

Arts Council England definition of Digital Art

The UK is currently undergoing a shift in how it categorises and funds creativity. The recent announcement by **Arts Council England (ACE)** to recognise **Digital Arts as its tenth supported artform** marks a major milestone. For decades, digital work was viewed as an enabling tool for traditional forms like theatre or music, rather than a discipline in its own right.

From April 2026, Digital Arts is integrated into all ACE funding programmes, with a dedicated National Portfolio (NPO) category commencing in 2027. This new discipline encompasses digital storytelling, immersive installations, AI-generative systems, data-driven art and virtual production. Mediale was deeply involved in the consultation and development of this new recognition and discipline, and ACE has cited Mediale as a founding member of the new cohort of digital art organisations.

This move signals that the UK is moving beyond experimental digital projects toward a permanent, structured Digital Arts ecosystem. And this is a huge opportunity for York and North Yorkshire, which can choose to be on the front foot, leveraging York's current status as a UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts.

The UK Immersive Arts programme

The **Immersive Arts programme** is a £6 million UK-wide initiative (2024–2027) designed to democratise access to immersive technologies for artists. Led by **UWE Bristol** and **Watershed**, the programme has funded 225 projects to date, awarding over £3.2 million across two rounds.

Funding is distributed through Explore, Experiment, and Expand strands to support various stages of R&D. Significant projects include **Mediale produced The Kids Are Halal**, **Helena Hamilton's Becoming**, which uses haptics to explore motherhood; **Biome Collective's The Game**, an immersive sound-walk reframing football rituals; and **Project 1961's Sound and Fury** (building on R&D supported in York by XR Stories), which reinvisions *Macbeth* as a performance within and around mainstream first person shooter games.

2. The UK Immersive and Experience Economy

The UK remains actively engaged in becoming a leader in the Immersive Economy, with a range of funding programmes over the last decade, including UKRI's Audiences of the Future, and the Creative Clusters programmes, foregrounding immersive projects. A range of evidence suggests audiences are welcoming immersive, interactive and location-based experiences alongside traditional media and arts formats. High-profile UK projects like *In Pursuit of Repetitive Beats* and the success of creative studio Marshmallow Laser Feast alongside others demonstrate a growing appetite for live-digital hybrids that combine physical space with virtual layers.

AI is transitioning from a novelty to a collaborator. Research from programmes like **UKRI's BRAID** highlights that artists are increasingly using generative AI not just for content creation, but for working with data. There is a strong and critical focus on Responsible AI, emphasising ethics, IP protection, and human-centric creativity.

3. Hurdles to Growth

Despite the UK's leadership, the sector faces several systemic challenges that threaten its long-term scalability:

Skills Gap and Talent Shortages:

A critical shortage of technical talent remains the sector's greatest bottleneck. According to the *Skills for Immersive Experience Creation report*, 65% of companies identify a lack of skills as a barrier to growth. There is an acute need for hybrid professionals who understand both narrative storytelling and technical execution (e.g. Creative Technologists).

Sustainability:

As the sector moves toward compute-intensive tech, like AI and high-fidelity XR, its carbon footprint is coming under scrutiny.

The Digital Divide and High Barriers to Entry:

While technology has democratised some aspects of creation, the gap is widening. Smaller organisations, creatives and artists often struggle with the steep cost of digital production, leading to a divide where only well-funded institutions can afford to produce, commission or host high-end immersive work.

Regional context

York and North Yorkshire (Y&NY) represents a distinctive creative economy characterised by a blend of urban innovation hubs and dispersed rural and coastal micro-clusters; While this creates strong local identity and diverse practice, it also presents challenges around connectivity, access to resources, and retaining talent across the region. The region covers a vast area of over 3,500 square miles, making it the UK's largest and most diverse Combined Authority geography. Economically, the creative industries provide between **11,400 and 20,905 jobs**, accounting for approximately 3% of the regional workforce. There are an estimated **2,600 creative businesses**, representing 6% of all regional enterprises, though 98% of these are micro or small businesses. The sector contributes **£790 million in Gross Value Added (GVA)** annually, which constitutes about 3% of the total regional GVA.

The region's context is anchored by **York's status as the UK's only UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts**, signalling global cultural leadership. Core sectoral strengths include **CreaTech** (the fusion of creative content and emerging technology), screen industries, immersive storytelling, digital heritage, and publishing. The **University of York** acts as a critical innovation anchor, leading flagship projects like **XR Stories** and the **CoSTAR Live Lab**, which bridge academic research with industrial application.

Y&NY is strategically positioned within the **Northern Creative Corridor** through the One Creative North initiative, which aims to connect local innovation nodes to larger metropolitan hubs like Leeds and Manchester. The **2025 Local Growth Plan** identifies creative industries as one of five sectors with a **competitive advantage**, positioning it as a core pillar for transformative regional growth. The region also exhibits high concentration in specialised areas like **IT and software**, which contributes 52% of the sector's regional GVA.

However, the regional context includes significant barriers, such as a persistent **shortage of affordable, suitable workspaces**, particularly in York's city centre. Access to **tailored finance** remains a hurdle for micro-businesses and freelancers who often lack collateral and rely on project-based income. The geography creates a **spatial imbalance**, where creative provision is concentrated in urban centres while rural and coastal areas face isolation and limited transport or digital infrastructure. Furthermore, there is a noted **talent leak**, with many graduates and mid-career creatives moving to larger cities due to a lack of sustained project pipelines locally.

Despite these hurdles, the region's creative economy is **dynamic and ambitious**, leveraging its rich heritage and natural landscapes for inspiration. The future context relies on new models of partnership between the public sector, private sector, academia, and communities. Realising its full potential will require **coordinated investment** in skills, digital connectivity, and intellectual property commercialisation.



3. COMPARATOR PROJECTS

Pervasive Media Studio (Bristol, UK)

1. Summary

The Pervasive Media Studio is a world-leading creative technologies research and development space located within Watershed, Bristol. Established in 2008, it is a partnership between **Watershed**, the **University of the West of England (UWE Bristol)**, and the **University of Bristol**.

Unlike traditional business incubators that focus primarily on VC-readiness and equity, the Pervasive Media Studio operates as a community of practice, and hosts a curated community of over 150 residents – ranging from artists and creative technologists to engineers and social scientists – exploring the intersections of technology, culture, and social experience.

2. Governance and Partnership Model

The Studio bridges gaps between cultural exhibition, academic research, and commercial application:

- /// **Watershed (Cultural Lead):** Provides the physical home, delivery through Creative Producer methodology, and platform for public engagement.
- /// **The Universities (Research Leads):** Provide academic rigour, access to grant funding (such as AHRC/ EPSRC), and a pipeline of graduate talent.
- /// **The Residents (Practice Leads):** Independent creatives and SMEs who drive the doing, ensuring that research remains applied and grounded in real-world experimentation.

3. Studio Philosophy and Culture

Pervasive Media Studio is defined by a specific set of cultural values that differentiate it from standard tech hubs:

- /// **Openness:** Residents are encouraged to share work early and regularly.
- /// **Give What You Can, Take What You Need:** There is no fee for residency. Instead, the 'rent' is contribution to the community—sharing expertise, attending Friday lunchtime talks, and mentoring others.
- /// **The Role of the Creative Producer:** Creative Producers act as curators and connective tissue, matching residents with potential partners, funding opportunities, or academic researchers. They facilitate the community rather than managing the facility.

4. Membership and Residency Framework

Access to the Studio is managed through a curated application process rather than a commercial lease.

- /// **Eligibility:** Applicants must be working at the intersection of technology and the arts/society. Projects must have an element of R&D.
- /// **Offer:** Residents receive desk space, meeting rooms, internet, and community.
- /// **Diversity:** The cohort includes solo artists, small tech startups (e.g., Ultraleap started here), and academic researchers. This mix prevents echo chambers and encourages cross-disciplinary breakthroughs.

5. Programming and Talent Development

The Studio maintains its vibrancy through a rigorous schedule of rituals and formal programmes:

- // **Friday Lunchtime Talks:** A weekly, free-to-attend public event where residents or guests present work-in-progress. It serves as a vital networking hook for the city.
- // **Residencies and Fellowships:** Fixed-term, often funded programmes that provide a stipend for artists to explore a specific theme.
- // **Sandbox Model:** A method developed by the Studio to accelerate ideas. It provides a small group of participants with seed funding, mentorship, and a structured environment to develop a prototype over three months.

6. Physical Infrastructure

Located in a converted Grade II listed warehouse, the space is designed for serendipity:

- // **Open Plan:** No cubicles; hot-desking is the norm to encourage conversation.
- // **Kitchen:** Centrally located, acting as the social heart of the Studio.
- // **Lab:** A dedicated space for messy making, soldering, and prototyping with hardware.
- // **Proximity to Public:** Being located above the Watershed cinema and café means the public is always nearby, making user-testing and public showcases seamless.

7. Impact and Economic Value

Pervasive Media Studio has proven that a culture-first incubator can drive significant economic results:

- // **Business Growth:** It acted as the nursery for Ultraleap (now a global leader in mid-air haptics), which originated from a University of Bristol PhD project developed within the Studio.
- // **Playable City:** A global movement that began in the Studio, using technology to make urban environments more playful (e.g., Hello Lamp Post), which has since been exported to cities like Tokyo, Lagos, and Sao Paulo.
- // **GVA Contribution:** Research has shown that for every £1 invested in the Studio's residency programmes, there is a significant multiplier effect in terms of subsequent grant capture and commercial turnover for the SMEs involved.

8. Strategic Lessons for Combine/Harvest

Key Insight: Neutral ground is vital. By situating the Studio within a cultural venue (Watershed) rather than a university campus or a corporate office, it lowers barriers for artists and creates a public-facing front door for innovation.

1. Prioritise Curation over Occupancy:

Don't just fill desks to pay the rent. Curate a mix of people who need each other but don't know it yet.

2. Invest in Producers, not Managers:

A building manager keeps the lights on; a Creative Producer builds the ecosystem. The latter is more expensive but yields higher innovation returns.

3. Define Your Niche:

The Studio succeeded by carving out a specific niche (technology that lives in the world, not just on screens). A new incubator should define its own niche.

ACMI-X

(Melbourne, Australia)

1. Summary

ACMI-X is a creative incubator and co-working space established by the **Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI)**. Launched in 2016, it was the first facility of its kind in Australia to be embedded within a major national museum. It serves as a 60-seat engine room for the Victorian creative industries, housing a mix of filmmakers, game developers, digital artists, and tech startups.

While many incubators are separate from the institutions that fund them, ACMI-X is now physically integrated into the museum's headquarters at Federation Square, ensuring that the curators who programme the museum work side-by-side with the practitioners who create the content.

2. Governance and Partnership Model

ACMI-X operates under a multi-layered partnership model that leverages state investment and academic rigour:

- /// **ACMI (Cultural Lead):** Provides the brand, industry networks, and physical proximity to a public audience of 1.2M+ annual visitors.
- /// **Creative Victoria (Delivery Lead):** Provided the initial seed funding (\$587k) as part of a strategy to boost Victoria's \$23B creative economy.
- /// **RMIT University (Research Lead):** Facilitates a two-way pipeline of talent, providing PhD researchers and students with industry-embedded desks and collaborative R&D opportunities.
- /// **Industry Partners:** Targeted residencies with commercial leaders (e.g., **Ludo Studio**, the makers of *Bluey*) to provide direct mentorship and opportunities to emerging creators.

3. Philosophy and Culture: The Perpetual Beta

The cultural philosophy of ACMI-X is rooted in the concept of a museum as a site of production and renewing interpretation.

- /// **Co-creation over Exhibition:** The goal is to move from showing to doing. Residents often consult on or directly contribute to museum exhibitions (e.g., the *Story of the Moving Image* permanent exhibition).
- /// **Breaking Silos:** By placing the museum's back-office staff (accountants, HR, marketing) in the same open-plan space as game developers and artists, ACMI-X fosters a creative culture.

4. Membership and Residency Framework

ACMI-X uses a curated membership model to ensure a high-quality community of interest:

- /// **Resident Membership:** For long-term tenants (6–12 months) who require a permanent desk and deep integration into the community.
- /// **Industry Membership:** A lower-cost nomadic tier that allows practitioners to access the community, attend professional development events, and use hot-desking facilities without the cost of a full office.
- /// **Selection Process:** Applications are vetted based on the project's relevance to screen culture and its potential for collaboration.

5. Programming and Talent Development

ACMI-X maintains its vibrancy through structured rituals:

- // **Works-In-Progress (WIP) Nights:** Bi-monthly events where residents present unfinished projects (games, VR experiences, film scripts) to peers and museum staff for feedback.
- // **Symposia:** High-intensity programs like the Animation Symposium, which brings global industry leaders together with residents for a day of deep-dive workshops.
- // **User-Testing Pathway:** A unique unfair advantage for residents is the ability to beta-test work-on-site with museum visitors, providing real-world user data easily.

6. Physical Infrastructure: The Dark Horse

The current ACMI-X space (designed by architects Warren and Mahoney) is situated within the Federation Square museum complex.

- // **The Heart:** The co-working residents are positioned at the centre of the floorplate, with museum staff around the perimeter. This 'collisions' design forces daily interaction.
- // **The Labs:** Access to specialised technology labs, including high-end edit suites and VR testing zones.
- // **Integrated Access:** Residents are steps away from the museum's cinemas and galleries, allowing for rapid transition from the desk to a public screening or showcase.

7. Impact and Economic Value

ACMI-X has demonstrated that a museum-led incubator can produce unicorn successes:

- // **Massive Monster (Cult of the Lamb):** The studio behind the global multi-million-selling game *Cult of the Lamb* was a long-term resident of ACMI-X during the game's development.
- // **Exhibition Co-Creation:** Residents have contributed to award-winning exhibitions like *Wonderland*, proving that the incubator creates a flexible workforce for the museum's own core business.
- // **Career Pathways:** The partnership with RMIT has created a proven bridge for graduates entering the industry, reducing brain drain from the city.

8. Strategic Lessons for Combine/Harvest

1.

Vertical Integration is Key:

Don't just place an incubator near an institution; place it *inside it*. The closer the makers are to the programmers, the more innovation occurs.

2.

Focus on a Specific Medium:

ACMI-X focuses on the moving image (Film, TV, Games). A clear niche attracts a more cohesive community.

3.

The Museum as Beta-Tester:

Use the cultural institution's audience as a resource. An incubator that offers guaranteed user-testing provides more value to a startup than one that only offers a desk.

NEW INC

(New York City, USA)

1. Summary

Founded in 2014 by the **New Museum**, NEW INC is a non-profit incubator that explores the intersection of art, design, and technology. It was established as a response to the ‘starving artist’ trope, aiming to provide creative practitioners with the business acumen and community support needed to build sustainable practices.

NEW INC hosts a yearly cohort of ~100 members. Unlike tech incubators that focus on ‘unicorns’ and rapid scale, NEW INC champions ‘zebras’—businesses that are profitable, socially responsible and collaborative.

2. Governance and Partnership Model

NEW INC operates as an initiative of the **New Museum of Contemporary Art**, a private, non-profit institution. This provides a distinct prestige factor and a high-level network of donors and industry leaders.

- /// **Funding:** Supported by a mix of membership fees, foundation grants (e.g., Knight Foundation, Mellon Foundation), and corporate sponsorships (e.g., Google, Nokia Bell Labs).
- /// **The Track System:** NEW INC uses a **Track Model**, where specific industry partners (like Science Sandbox or ONX Studio) sponsor ‘Tracks’ focused on themes like XR, Art & Code, or Creative Science. This allows the incubator to fund specific cohorts through corporate/foundation social responsibility budgets.

3. Philosophy: Sustainable Practice over Exit Strategy

NEW INC’s cultural philosophy is built on three pillars:

- /// **Not-Just-for-Profit:** They support a mix of non-profits, sole proprietorships, and LLCs. The goal is financial independence, rather than venture capital and exit.
- /// **Ethics and Equity:** There is a heavy focus on social justice and diversity. A significant portion of the cohort is dedicated to BIPOC and LGBTQ+ creators, ensuring the future of tech is not mono-cultural.
- /// **Collective Intelligence:** Members are encouraged to view themselves as a community of peers rather than competitors.

4. Membership and Residency Framework

The NEW INC model is highly structured, operating on a 12-month cycle (September to August):

- /// **Curation:** Admission is highly competitive. Applicants are grouped into Tracks based on their discipline.
- /// **Full-Stack Membership:** Members pay a monthly fee (subsidised for some) which includes a desk, but the primary value is the **Professional Development Curriculum**.
- /// **Equity-Free:** NEW INC takes **no equity** in the companies or projects it supports, maintaining its status as a mission-driven non-profit.

5. Programming and Talent Development

NEW INC's programme has a strong focus on mentorship

- /// **Mentorship:** Every member is paired with a mentor from NYC's tech, design, or art scenes.
- /// **Business Lab:** Monthly workshops on hard skills like financial modelling, IP law, fundraising, and pitch deck design for creatives.
- /// **Demo Day:** A high-profile annual event where members pitch to investors, curators, and the press, often held at the New Museum's theater.

6. Physical and Virtual Infrastructure

Originally housed in a building adjacent to the New Museum on the Bowery, NEW INC has evolved into a hybrid model:

- /// **Shared Workspace:** Designed for flexibility with anchor desks for studios and flexible seating for individuals.
- /// **ONX Studio:** A partnership with Onassis USA, providing a dedicated space for members working in Extended Reality (XR) and spatial computing.
- /// **Virtual Membership:** Post-pandemic, they successfully launched a Virtual Track, allowing global participation in their curriculum without the NYC real estate cost.

7. Impact and Economic Value

NEW INC has incubated over 600 practitioners. Notable impacts include:

- /// **Hyphen-Labs:** An international collective whose work at the intersection of technology and women of color (e.g., *NeuroSpeculative AfroFeminism*) gained global acclaim after being incubated here.
- /// **MSCHF:** The viral art collective known for provocative digital interventions had early roots/connections within the NEW INC ecosystem.
- /// **Sustainability:** 70% of NEW INC alumni businesses are still operational five years later—a significantly higher rate than traditional creative startups.

8. Strategic Lessons for Combine/Harvest

- 1. Use the Track Model to Diversify Funding:**
By creating themed cohorts e.g., The Future of Museums or The Environment, you could attract specific corporate and foundation sponsors who want to support a particular niche.
- 2. Focus on Business Literacy for Artists:**
Many arts/tech programmes fail because the artists cannot sustain themselves. NEW INC's focus on the business of being a creative is its most valuable asset.
- 3. The Annual Cycle creates Alumni Loyalty:**
By having a clear start and end date (the 12-month cohort), you create a shared sense of completion and a powerful, lifelong alumni network that continues to support each other and the institution.

4. DIALOGUE WITH YORK AND NORTH YORKSHIRE STAKEHOLDERS

In-depth interviews were conducted with the stakeholders representative of the region's creative and technological infrastructure. Interviewees were selected as key locally influential individuals, working with creatives in their location in North Yorkshire, and running creatives facilities, programmes, or developing policy. Everyone was asked to reflect on the same ten questions around the project idea, feasibility concerns, capacity concerns, opportunities and risks. Further topics were discussed in more detail as they arose with individuals.

All stakeholders were happy for their views to be included in the report, and they were additionally given the chance to raise issues or make comments anonymously.

Shared Vision and Strategic Objectives

Opportunities

There was a genuine shared ambition, energy and excitement about the need for this project from everyone we spoke to. This energy focused in particular around a programme of bespoke and targeted interventions being made into the creative communities around different organisations and geographies across the region.

The project was connected to building a sense of confidence and self-belief in local creative and digital innovation, improving connectivity and creating pathways and opportunities for development, while also responding to local needs. It was also seen as a key "conduit to feed industry and sector needs back into the combined authority's growth plan and broader strategic ambitions".

The consultations highlighted a real and urgent need for this intervention, and consequently, both Mediale and York Creatives feel a strong sense of responsibility towards ensuring the project framework is designed to deliver a meaningful and lasting impact for local creatives and the wider community. Ultimately, the incubator can mark a key milestone as the region embraces future-facing, emergent creativity and technologies.

Stakeholders saw the incubator as:



an ambitious programme arriving at the right moment



an ideas engine for each location



a catalyst for creativity... a brokering system that feeds opportunities to artists



connecting with the wider world to create projects of scale



Risks

The greatest risks were around the varying needs and situations facing different parts of the region, meaning that programme design needs to be specific and responsive to the context of the location and the participants. Based on the local insight from the stakeholders interviewed for this report, some suggested themes and foci for regional programme designs are outlined in Section 5.

A further risk identified is the momentum and conversation around related initiatives in the region and in the sector more widely, and the pattern of overlapping initiatives resulting in momentum not being turned into action: there was a shared desire to act rather than just continue talking.



Impact, Scale and Legacy

Opportunities

A recurring theme in the discussions was the significant potential to strategically align the Combine/Harvest initiative with both national and international priorities focused on stimulating immersive, creative digital growth and capitalising on the rapid expansion of the AI economy. This alignment is viewed as a critical success factor, positioning the initiative at the intersection of cultural production and technological innovation. The project can serve as a vehicle for developing new creative methodologies responsibly leveraging artificial intelligence and other new tools, while simultaneously fostering the skills and infrastructure required to lead in emerging creative landscapes. Combine/Harvest can and should unlock new funding streams, attract a diverse pool of talent, and contribute measurably to the UK's reputation as a global hub for the convergence of arts and advanced technology.

Risks

A significant risk factor identified during the programme's initial planning and scoping phase was the potential misalignment of the proposed programming with the actual needs and skill levels of practitioners across the various geographical locations. It was noted that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach would likely prove ineffective, as the creative and business ecosystems vary considerably between the target areas. This risk encompasses the possibility of providing support that is either too basic for established professionals or too advanced for emerging talent, leading to poor engagement and minimal impact.

Furthermore, a critical concern was raised regarding the potential for local creatives and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to face barriers in accessing the programme and its support mechanisms. This risk stems from various factors, including lack of awareness of opportunities, overly complex application or registration processes, geographical accessibility issues for physical workshops, or eligibility criteria that exclude. Should these barriers be extended into Combine/Harvest, the programme would fail to reach the very communities it is intended to benefit, undermining its core objectives of fostering local economic growth and creative development. Therefore, a concerted effort is required to ensure programme outreach is inclusive and tailored to the local context, and that the support offered is both relevant and easily accessible to all intended participants.

Physical Spaces, Infrastructure, Technical Capacity and Capabilities

Engagement with York and North Yorkshire stakeholders identified a range of spaces and other infrastructure, supportive of increased creative technological collaboration across the region.

The York and North Yorkshire region currently follows a hub-and-spoke model, with York having naturally developed as the central node, offering world-class tech infrastructure, including digital creative R&D labs. This is driven largely by university investment and an ecosystem of creative companies in the City, supported by anchor organisations like York Creatives. This central node has the potential to become an enabler for the rest of the York and North Yorkshire region. The wider **North Yorkshire** region offers a strong network of Creative & Community Hubs (e.g. in Harrogate, Scarborough, Northallerton, Skipton) that provide essential co-working, studio and creative infrastructure, but they currently lack the specialised high-tech hardware, organisations or level of staffing resources found in York. Combine/Harvest is designed to bridge this gap, deploying York's technical resources into these spokes.

While these assets exist, they currently lack a unified framework for coordination. The new mayoral combined authority provides a critically important opportunity to consolidate these resources through the delivery of transformational programmes that fully realise the creative and technological potential of the region.



York: Creative Tech Hub for York and North Yorkshire

York holds the highest concentration of specialised technical capacity, particularly for immersive R&D and production, but also makerspaces e.g. the Creativity Lab in the University of York Library and key companies.

XR Stories (University of York):

Capabilities: A dedicated R&D facility for extended reality.

Infrastructure: Features a state-of-the-art technology lab including a 9m x 5m motion-capture volume with a 22-camera Vicon system (active & passive tracking) and XSens suits.

Equipment: VR/XR headsets (Meta, Pico, Steam), compute for game engine work, face-tracking, Artec 3D scanners, projection, and immersive audio.

Relevance: Critical for high-end prototyping and digital storytelling content creation. Ideal for creative business incubation, networking and events, and hosting the investable/commercial side of the incubator.

York St John Creative Centre:

Capabilities: A purpose-built 3-storey space for performance and computer science.

Infrastructure: Contains a 157-seat theatre with state-of-the-art lighting/sound and a dedicated floor for computer science teaching.

Relevance: A bridge between creative arts (theatre) and digital practice (software/games development).

Key Industry Players:

Viridian FX: Visual Effects and screen storytelling.

Bright White: Museum/Heritage specialists.

Enabling organisations:

York Creatives: Empowering York's creative communities and professionals by providing access to resources, networks and opportunities that enhance creative growth, sustainability, innovation and inclusivity.

North Yorkshire: Creative Infrastructure & Flexible Space

Outside York, the infrastructure shifts from specialised labs and capability to flexible creative workspaces, serving a range of stakeholders, but often with analogue arts as their main focus. These spaces are essential for regional inclusion and the local delivery and nomadic nature of the vision for Combine/Harvest. For example:

Northallerton: C4DI (Centre for Digital Innovation):

Focus: Agri-tech and food processing, but also with a broad tech remit.

Infrastructure: Part of the treadmills development (former prison). Features a Podcast Studio (Digit-UII) and broadcast-quality audio/video production facilities.

Relevance: High-quality workspace with specific content creation (podcasting) capability.

Skipton: Craven Arts House

Focus: Arts, music, and community connection.

Infrastructure: Includes a recording studio, music rooms, artist studios, and a main hall for 100 people.

Relevance: Provides audio-specific technical capacity that compliments visual/XR work.

Scarborough: The Old Parcels Office

Focus: Contemporary art and exhibitions.

Infrastructure: Grade II listed building, flexible gallery space.

Capabilities: immersive installations (e.g., Chaos soundscape installation).

Relevance: A key venue for exhibiting digital heritage/culture work, even if production happens elsewhere.

Other Venues:

Malton:
AHH Studios

Richmond:
The Station

Selby:
Community House /
Our Space

Gaps & Opportunities

Creative and Tech:

Arts organisations across North Yorkshire often see creative as strictly ‘artists’ and analogue practice. A challenge for Combine/Harvest is how can we embrace that whilst extending to deliver on the wider ambition and potential.

Equipment Access:

Rural/coastal areas cite lack of access to digital equipment as a major barrier.

Key Recommendations

1.

Nomadic:

The incubator should be seeded across the region, with projects informed by and engaging with local leadership and developing bespoke methodologies for cross disciplinary innovation.

2.

Relevant and Responsive:

Working with local communities and stakeholders to establish unique approaches and projects.

3.

Action-oriented:

Prototypes will be encouraged and supported through a devolved Prototyping Fund for each location, to enable additional specialists, e.g. app developers, to be commissioned.

4.

Long Term:

Programme design that aims to develop and retain capacity and capability to self-initiate and deliver further local residencies after the initial 6 month residency.

5.

Ambitious:

The Mayoral team emphasised the need and desire for transformational programmes for our region and the critical importance of the region’s creative economy to drive growth. A programme that delivers highly impactful creative outputs, that also communicates the region’s unique specialisms will attract inward investment and further growth.

5. PROPOSED ROUTE FORWARD

Concept proposal

Desk and primary research highlighted the importance for Y&NY's unique context of an incubator programme that is:

1. Nomadic: Seeding projects, local leadership and methodologies for cross disciplinary innovation	2. Relevant and Responsive: To local communities' and stakeholders' needs	3. Action-oriented: Prototypes will be encouraged and supported through a devolved Prototyping Fund for each location and season, to enable additional specialists, e.g. app developers, to be commissioned.	4. Long Term: Develops and retains capacity and capability to deliver further local residencies after the initial 6 month residency	5. Ambitious: The Mayoral team emphasised the need and desire for transformational programmes
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Principles for Combine/Harvest

The feasibility study will develop a viable proposal for a digital creativity incubator which is:

Highly practical, relevant, and meaningful within the York and North Yorkshire context, ensuring it is deliverable, grounded in reality, and feasible.	Inclusive and Sustainable, avoiding reliance on a single funder or stakeholder.	Contributing answers to critical questions about our world and driving expanded definitions of wealth.	Driven by ambitions for both UK and International prominence, leveraging York's existing international networks.
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Project design, target SMEs and creatives, numbers

Combine/Harvest seeks to visibly raise the region's profile reputation as a creative beacon in the UK, promoting contemporary digital creativity and positioning it as a leading centre for digital heritage, culture thinking, experimentation, and practice. This will contribute to the region's goal of becoming a leader within the One Creative North / The Great North Creative initiative, positioning Combine/Harvest as the cornerstone of creative digital programmes with the potential to scale across the North of England.

Inspired by global best practices, the programme envisions R&D hubs, incubator spaces, and technologically capable creative environments. We are intending experimental digital interpretation labs, funded residency programmes, dedicated workspaces, flexible public spaces for diverse cultural events, underpinned by a vibrant programme of events, the world's leading creative and scientific minds actively seeking out Y&NY as a destination to develop their ideas. The region's unique heritage assets, natural beauty, and sector relevant resources such as the University of York's XR Stories programme and its UNESCO Creative City of Media Arts status, provide a fertile ground for this development.

Creating inclusive, equitable spaces

Over three years, we will offer open, iterative and well-supported R&D opportunities that are among the most ambitious in the sector. We'll do this by bringing our significant expertise in artist and project incubation/development, and partnering with organisations and collectives who bring new perspectives and practices which challenge existing paradigms (and thus challenge our own thinking).

Further, we will build an engaged and collaborative space for practice-led research that is not tied to individual projects or organisations. This work will bring cross-industry partners together to develop next-generation imaginative and ethical ideas equal to its next-generation technologies and models.

Through this work we'll support 30+ independent creatives to identify and remove the barriers that currently limit participation in the digital arts. By focusing on areas such as technologies, cultural funding, cultural management, touring, commissioning, audiences, aesthetic/artistic value judgements, we will ensure that the region's creative ecosystem is more inclusive and equitable for everyone.



There seems to be an increasing acknowledgment that sporadic project grants or 'scaling' individual organisations is insufficient. What is required is meaningful, intentional coordination

Annette Mees,
Audiences Lab,
King's College.



Artistic, Thematic and Aesthetic Considerations

Mediale is a commissioning organisation, and that clarity is central to our approach. We are not a venue, festival or presenting house; our role is to originate new work. The curatorial question that drives us is not "What should we show?" but "What should we help create, and with whom?" Combine/Harvest emerges directly from this approach.

The work we will support and create focuses on technology-as-material, tool or societal factor, rather than technology as subject. We're interested in artists for whom the digital or technological process is genuinely embedded in how they think and make, not organisations or projects where tech is applied as a layer of novelty on top. Maintaining criticality and depth to the work we do is of existential importance to the partner organisations, the reputation and credibility in the sector of C/H, and the motivation levels of its staff.

The artists and creatives we will select and recruit for Combine/Harvest represent something important: a community of practice we're actively cultivating, not a one-off roster. The progression pathway from development to commissioning is the focus of our work, and how we work. We specialise in working with exciting professional artists who are facing something of a glass ceiling, be that intersectional, geographic, artform or technology specific. We're good at spotting real talent that has the potential to achieve exponentially more profile, income, opportunity etc.

Artist development that doesn't result in a public output is a valuable and desperately needed part of the ecosystem. Brokering opportunities, strengthening applications, making introductions - this is curatorial work even when it's invisible in the 'public' programme.

There's a productive tension in the strategy between regional embeddedness (North Yorkshire) and national/international ambition but local engagement and global perspectives can co-exist. The opportunity is for place-based work to give us something genuinely distinctive: a vibrant and talented creative community with real roots, not just the ambition to be nationally relevant from a 'rural' location arbitrarily.

Management and communications

The Combine/Harvest programme would be optimally managed by Mediale: An Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation, with extensive experience designing and delivering major projects regionally, nationally and internationally. Mediale is a commissioning organisation, which works at the intersection of art and technology.

A project manager will be recruited and appointed to lead the design and delivery of phase 1, as well as supplementary facilitation and venue management staff as required for each phase.

Logistics

Programme Structure and Scope

The Combine/Harvest initiative is conceived as a focused three-year development programme. Its core structure involves a series of intensive, six-month interventions, strategically located across six distinct areas within York & North Yorkshire. This rotational model is designed to maximise geographic reach and local engagement.

Participant Recruitment and Support

A central element of Combine/Harvest is the recruitment of a diverse cohort of artists and creative fellows. This will be managed through a rigorous, transparent open call process, ensuring broad accessibility. Successful applicants will receive comprehensive support, including a participation fee of £4,000. Furthermore, participants will be provided with extensive in-kind support, which encompasses necessary access permissions, the use of specialised equipment, and dedicated studio space throughout the six-month programme duration. This holistic package is designed to remove financial and logistical barriers, allowing participants to focus entirely on their creative and professional development.





Community Engagement and Outreach

Each six-month programme intervention will be characterised by a strong commitment to wider public engagement. Regular, programmed open-access events and workshops will be a mandatory feature, providing opportunities for community members, local businesses, and the general public to interact with the cohort, witness work in progress, and participate in creative activities. These events are crucial for fostering a supportive local ecosystem around the creative industries.



Innovation and Industry Collaboration

A key feature of the programme is the integration of practical, real-world industry challenges. Between three and six 'innovation challenges' will be developed in close collaboration with partner companies operating within the local York & North Yorkshire area. These challenges will be presented to the artist and creative fellow cohort as 'live briefs,' requiring them to apply their creative and problem-solving skills to genuine business or community needs. This partnership-driven model ensures the programme delivers tangible, innovative outcomes with commercial and social relevance.



Mentoring and Personalised Development

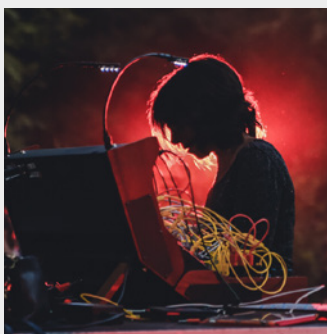
The mentoring and support framework within Combine/Harvest will be adaptive and participant-focused, informed by the specific creative practices, individual needs, and professional requirements of each participant creative, ensuring the support maximises their potential and addresses their unique developmental trajectories.

Programming

The core of this initiative is the establishment of an innovative, experimental Digital Interpretation Lab. This lab will employ a novel methodology designed to seamlessly integrate a diverse range of regional collections with cutting-edge technology and deep-seated community engagement programming. It is conceived as a dynamic hub where heritage, art, and technology converge.

To ensure the continuous infusion of fresh perspectives and expertise, the lab will be underpinned by a dedicated, externally funded, rolling Residency Programme. This programme will attract local, national, and international digital artists, technologists, curators, and researchers, fostering a rich environment for collaboration and knowledge exchange.

The physical and virtual space of the lab will be programmed and managed by Mediale, who will work on amplifying each location's value to its communities. Programming will be diverse and multifaceted, playing host to a regular schedule of events, including:



Live Performance:
Showcasing digital and hybrid performance art.



Film Screening:
Featuring experimental and artist-led film, particularly focusing on digital culture and regional narratives.



Artists Talks:
Providing platforms for resident artists and visiting practitioners to discuss their work and process.



Guest Lectures:
Bringing in leading voices from academia, industry, and the arts to explore the nexus of heritage, digital technology, and community.



Work in Progress sharing:
Low-stakes, public-facing sessions allowing residents and collaborators to test and present nascent ideas and projects.



Networking and Nurturing Events:
Facilitating connections between the creative digital community, heritage professionals, and industry partners.



Artist and Creative 'Crits':
Structured feedback sessions designed to refine and develop artistic and digital projects.



Workshops:
Practical sessions focused on skill-building in digital heritage interpretation, new media, and creative technologies for both professionals and the public.



There is significant and deliberate potential in this programming to allow the region – York and North Yorkshire – to truly stand out under the guidance and expertise of Mediale and York Creatives. The focus will be on creating unique content and experiences that are deeply connected to the distinct geography, inherent skills, and cultural assets of the region, and the specific nature of the creative digital community based here. This strategy is an explicit move away from trying to emulate generic, disconnected programming found elsewhere.

The initiative will be phased for sustainable growth. It will commence with small, targeted digital and physical interventions to build momentum and prove the methodology. Years 1–3 are designated as the crucial springboard phase – a period focused on establishing the lab, defining the residency programme, and securing initial successes. These foundational years will be essential for garnering increased, sustained funding for more ambitious, large-scale experimentation in the years to follow.

Throughout this entire process, a relentless focus will be placed on engaging with both the creative digital industry and key funders, locally, nationally, and internationally. This engagement will be maintained through a continuous programme of showcases, professional workshops, and high-level meetings hosted within the lab space. Ultimately, this initiative is dedicated to creating a highly flexible, adaptable, and indispensable space for experimentation with art, heritage, and technology specifically tailored to the needs and ambitions of York & North Yorkshire.

Proposed Locations and Initial Focus

It is important to emphasise that each Season and location of Combine/Harvest will have a theme and focus designed by the incubator participants in conversation with their communities. However, based on the consultation responses, there are key locations and themes that could valuably be explored initially, for example:

Season 1: York

(hosted at XR Stories, the University of York)

‘Public Realm, Major Developments, and the digital meeting the physical’

The theme for a York-based Combine/Harvest programme will focus on Digital Heritage and the Public Realm, supporting a multi-disciplinary team of artists, technologists and students to create new ways of engaging with nature, culture and heritage to boost the town’s tourism economy.

This theme is supported by several key insights from the consultation:

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>1. Crossover with Visitor Economy.</p> <p>York is a heavily tourist-centric town and the project should play to this regional strength. Using immersive technology to enhance the visitor experience and encourage tourists to ‘stay here longer’ appeals to a wide range of stakeholders.</p> | <p>2. Linking to Heritage.</p> <p>The heritage focus of the identity and resources of York city centre make this a real USP opportunity for creative practice to be developed here.</p> | <p>3. Collaboration with Local Business Ecosystems.</p> <p>Collaboration with Local Business Ecosystems. The programme will be structured around challenges set by local businesses in the hospitality and heritage sectors, and lean into the long term potential of the city’s creative industries.</p> |
|---|---|---|

Season 2: Malton

(with AHH (Art Happens Here) Collective CIC)

‘New approaches to Social Prescribing’

The Malton and Ryedale incubator could leverage the creative sector’s innovative, forward-thinking, and dynamic nature to design, develop, and test new solutions for social prescribing. A multi-disciplinary group would form the core of the incubator, bringing together key roles, such as creative practitioners, technologists and health sector specialists (GP or social prescribing link workers).

Although generating lots of interest in the UK, the potential and impact of social prescribing is hindered by challenges stemming from financial, cultural, policy and process misalignment between the medical and creative sectors. Research generated by creative leaders in the Malton and Ryedale have emphasised that social prescribing requires relevant evaluation, clearer definition of responsibilities for outcomes, and new investment in creative and community providers.

Key outcomes of the incubator could include establishing long-term methodologies, resources and knowledge for the community to develop and deliver new solutions to local needs.

Season 3: Skipton

(with Craven Arts)

‘Stay Here Longer: New approaches for the visitor economy’

The theme for a Skipton-based Combine/Harvest incubator could focus on Heritage and Tourism. The incubator would support a team of local artists, creatives and Craven College students to work with local businesses and cultural organisations to develop new cultural and heritage prototypes to boost the town and local area’s tourism economy.

This theme is supported by several key insights from the consultation:

- 1. Visitor Economy:**
Skipton is a regional visitor economy hub and art and technology was identified as having potential to enhance the visitor experience and encourage tourists to ‘stay here longer’.
- 2. New connections to Heritage:**
A heritage focus held particular interest, as it linked in other digital skills projects Craven Arts have worked on.
- 3. Embracing Digital and Addressing the Digital Divide:**
The incubator will embrace and expand on Craven Arts’ network of traditional visual artists into more diverse, younger creatives working in digital and immersive. The incubator must recognise and respond to persistent digital divide challenges in the town and surrounding areas.
- 4. Engaging with Local Business and Support Networks:**
The programme should be designed to address specific challenges presented by local businesses, particularly within the hospitality and heritage sectors. Furthermore, the initiative could collaborate with key local support organisations to enhance its impact, e.g.
 - /// **Skipton BID:** To utilise their strong connections with local business owners.
 - /// **Craven College:** To engage with younger demographics and potentially leverage their existing facilities, such as the 360 virtual room and immersive technology resources.

Season 4: Scarborough

(with Arcade)

‘Coast to Conurbation: connecting rural digital creatives with opportunity’

The theme for a Scarborough-based Combine/Harvest programme will focus on scaling coastal creativity. This season will utilise the incubator to bridge the gap between the isolated coastal artistic community and national digital markets, moving from a localised visitor economy focus to a high-value productive digital economy. The cohort will consist of a Scarborough-based Artist, a Creative Technologist, and a Community Changemaker (facilitated by Arcade) to prototype digital exports that elevate local talent to a UK-wide audience.

This theme is supported by several key insights from the consultation and regional research:

- 1. Professionalising Production and Process:**
Scarborough needs professional support to increase production values and processes. The incubator will provide technical capability work to help local artists achieve scale and overcome current quality barriers.
- 2. Overcoming the Coastal inequalities:**
Combine/Harvest will act as a brokering system to reconnect Scarborough creatives, with wider markets without requiring them to leave the region.
- 3. Creative Export Model:**
The incubator aligns with the Y&NYCA Local Growth Plan by acting as a calling-card to showcase Scarborough’s digital maturity, aiming to reverse talent leaks by proving contemporary digital creativity can thrive on the coast with the right infrastructure.

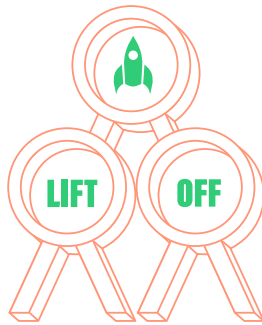
THE MODEL IN PRACTICE

Planning and production timelines

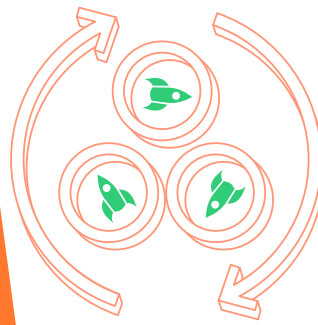
The Combine/Harvest initiative is designed as a focused three-year development programme (2026 to 2029).

This springboard phase is dedicated to establishing the lab, defining the residency model, and securing initial successes before scaling into larger regional experiments.

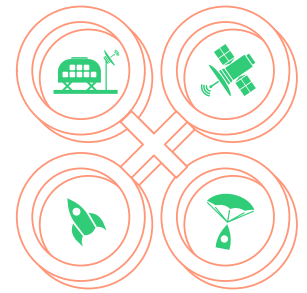
The delivery follows a nomadic, rotational model with two intensive six-month interventions (seasons) occurring each year across six distinct regional areas.



1. Pre-Launch and Programme Setup (September 2026 to January 2027)



2. Programme Cycle (2027 to 2029)



3. Six-Month Residency Lifecycle (Recurring)

Following the feasibility study concluded in April 2026, the programme will officially commence its operational setup in September 2026.

- ▮ **Team Recruitment:** Appointment of the full-time Mediale Creative Producer and the York Creatives management team.
- ▮ **Brand Launch:** York Creatives will initiate the design and web development phase to establish the project's digital calling card and recruitment portal.
- ▮ **Host Onboarding:** Finalising access permissions and technical audits for Season 1 (York) and Season 2 (Malton) host venues.

The programme will cycle through six regional locations, ensuring geographic reach across the Combined Authority area, for example:

Year 1: Foundation Year (February 2027 – January 2028)

- ▮ **Season 1 (Feb–July 2027):** York (at XR Stories). Focus: Digital Heritage and the Public Realm.
- ▮ **Season 2 (Aug 2027 – Jan 2028):** Malton (with AHH Collective). Focus: New Approaches to Social Prescribing.

Year 2: Regional Expansion (February 2028 – January 2029)

- ▮ **Season 3 (Feb–July 2028):** Skipton (with Craven Arts). Focus: New Approaches for the Visitor Economy.
- ▮ **Season 4 (Aug 2028 – Jan 2029):** Scarborough (with Arcade). Theme: Coast to Conurbation.

Year 3: Consolidation and Scaling (February 2029 – December 2029)

- ▮ **Season 5 & Season 6:** Locations to be confirmed (e.g., Northallerton, Selby, or Richmond) based on Year 1 and 2 evaluations.

Within each regional season, the cohort of three creative residents follows a structured production timeline:

Month 1: Recruitment and Onboarding

- ▮ Rigorous, transparent open call and participant selection.
- ▮ Briefing on the 3–6 'innovation challenges' set by local partner companies.

Months 2–3: Research and Development (R&D)

- ▮ Establishment of the local Digital Interpretation Lab.
- ▮ Mentoring sessions tailored to individual developmental trajectories.

Month 4: Public Interaction and Feedback

- ▮ Mandatory open-access events, workshops, and 'Work in Progress' sharing sessions to test ideas with the local community.

Months 5–6: Prototyping and Final Showcase

- ▮ Utilisation of the £10,000 Prototyping Fund to commission technical specialists (e.g., app developers).
- ▮ Final Demo Day and high-level showcases for funders and international networks.



Planning and production timelines

The Combine/Harvest initiative is designed as a focused three-year development programme (2026 to 2029). This springboard phase is dedicated to establishing the lab, defining the residency model, and securing initial successes before scaling into larger regional experiments. The delivery follows a nomadic, rotational model with two intensive six-month interventions (seasons) occurring each year across six distinct regional areas.

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 - Rigorous, transparent open call and participant selection.
 - Briefing on the 3–6 'innovation challenges' set by local partner companies.
 - Months 2–3: Research and Development (R&D)
 - Establishment of the local Digital Interpretation Lab.
 - Mentoring sessions tailored to individual developmental trajectories.
- /// **Month 4:** Public Interaction and Feedback
 - Mandatory open-access events, workshops, and 'Work in Progress' sharing sessions to test ideas with the local community.
- /// **Months 5–6:** Prototyping and Final Showcase
 - Utilisation of the £10,000 Prototyping Fund to commission technical specialists (e.g., app developers).
 - Final Demo Day and high-level showcases for funders and international networks.

4. Evaluation and Legacy

Parallel to the seasonal delivery, the management team will maintain a continuous programme of engagement with the creative digital industry and key funders. This includes quarterly evaluations to refine the methodology and high-level meetings to secure sustained funding beyond the initial three-year springboard phase.



Results, Outputs and KPIs

Beneficiaries

PHASE	CREATIVES / CREATIVE BUSINESSES SUPPORTED and ROLES CREATED	ESTABLISHED BUSINESSES BENEFITTED
Year 1	9	12
Year 2	9	12
Year 3	9	12

Resilience and Legacy

The anticipated impacts of participation in this project are multi faceted and long term for the participants, creatives and partners. Through our research and extensive experience with related programmes in the sector, we expect:

- /// Increased profitability of normal business operations
- /// Hugely increased professional profile and resulting network
- /// Increased business stability through new opportunities and collaborations
- /// Ripple effect / indirect benefit of multiple new businesses established in the area, due to momentum of creative business community
- /// Upscaling of the income generating potential of the locality in terms of inward investment directly to creative businesses and to the civic infrastructure for supporting talent development
- /// Legacy goal of ongoing support and provision for creative businesses made viable due to successes of initial pilot programme
- /// Each of the 6 locations and programmes connected in regional ecology, and celebrated nationally and internationally.

Mayor’s Agenda and Local Growth Plan connection

Creative and digital has been highlighted numerous times by the Mayor, and the Local Growth Plan, as a priority growth sector. The sector is a strategic asset to the region, but there is still significant need for joined up regional activity, not just based in York, and activity which meets businesses where they are, unlocking enormous potential for growth and innovation.

Budget

The total projected budget for the three-year Combine/Harvest programme is £664,800. This investment is designed to support a delivery model across six regional locations, providing direct financial support to artists, high value promotion of the programme, world leading delivery management from Mediale, and building the capacity of local partner organisations.

The budget is structured into four primary areas of expenditure:

1. Core Delivery and Management (£292,800)

This covers the strategic leadership and operational delivery of the programme by the two core partners:

- /// **Mediale (£216,000):** This includes a full-time Creative Producer (£127,500 over three years) to act as the connective tissue for the ecosystem, alongside a part-time Creative Director.
- /// **York Creatives (£76,800):** This allocation supports management time to lead the York residency, and lead promotion and marketing of the programme to ensure the project has a high-profile calling card brand.

2. Direct Investment in Creatives (£132,000)

A significant portion of the budget is ring-fenced for direct artist support to remove financial barriers to participation:

- /// **Participant Bursaries (£72,000):** Each of the 18 participants (3 per location, 2 locations per year) receives a £4,000 fee for their six-month residency.
- /// **Prototyping Fund (£60,000):** A devolved fund of £10,000 per location/season is available to enable the commissioning of additional technical specialists, such as app developers or engineers, to help realise high-end prototypes.

3. Local Partner Delivery Costs (£240,000)

To ensure the programme is sustainable and leaves a legacy in each location, £80,000 is allocated annually to support two local delivery partners (£40,000 each). This funding per partner includes:

- /// **£25,000** for an additional 0.5 FTE Creative Producer to support the local cohort.
- /// **£10,000** as a contribution to existing staff time.
- /// **£5,000** split between space hire and overheads.

4. Annual Phasing

The expenditure is relatively evenly weighted across the three-year cycle to maintain momentum:

- /// **Year 1: £229,400**
- /// **Year 2: £214,100**
- /// **Year 3: £221,300**

PR and comms

This project is ambitious and intentionally different to the commonly commissioned support for creative businesses and social impact activities. It will be highly visible, and spark new confidence in Y&NY: the calling-card and the jewel in the crown for the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority's Creative Industries work. This is very exciting, and will require significant efforts to develop the overarching and local messaging for recruitment and stakeholder engagement and buy-in.

We have allocated £30,000 over three years in design, marketing and development costs to ensure that the project can communicate itself well to all its stakeholders. York Creatives will lead on commissioning these activities, from its expanding network of creative professionals local to the Y&NY region, ensuring that wealth is retained in the region's creative industries. York Creatives will also lead on promotion and recruitment of incubator residents.

Political buy in/stakeholders

York and North Yorkshire has 3 key political organisations: Y&NYCA, CYC, NYC, each with a remit and view on culture and creative industries. Although there is some evidence of coordinated working across the region, this project in particular will benefit from senior buy-in in these organisations.

The proposed Combine/Harvest programme aligns with each of these organisations strategy and plans in the following ways:

York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority (Y&NYCA)

Combine/Harvest directly supports the York and North Yorkshire Local Growth Plan, which identifies the Creative Industries as a primary sector of competitive advantage for regional growth. By establishing a digital creativity incubator, the programme fulfills the authority's goal of increasing the number of creative start-ups and scale-ups while building regional confidence to attract inward investment. Combine/Harvest addresses the talent leak identified by commissioned research, which found that York loses 1.2 creative workers for every one it attracts. The programme's focus on CreaTech R&D and innovation anchors the region as a trailblazing City Region Rural Powerhouse, and leverages the University of York's research excellence to turn creative strength into long-term economic prosperity.

North Yorkshire Council (NYC)

The project aligns with the North Yorkshire Cultural Strategy, which aims to place accessible and inclusive culture and heritage at the heart of improving people's lives. Combine/Harvest's global ambition with local focus mirrors the strategy's intent to champion cultural entitlement across the UK's largest and most diverse combined authority geography. Its focus on experimental digital interpretation specifically supports the council's goal of creating distinctive cultural spaces that benefit communities by revitalising heritage assets through technology. The incubator's values-driven approach to addressing social equity and sustainability resonates with NYC's commitment to using culture to improve health, wellbeing, and quality of life for its nearly one million residents.

City of York Council

Combine/Harvest is a catalyst for the York Culture Strategy, specifically addressing the strategic priority of Talent Development and Retention. It identifies and proposes a solution to the lack of dedicated creative, artistic spaces, by offering a model and methodology for transformational creative practice to live in these spaces, ensuring that they provide value back to the City's whole community. By including digital creativity and heritage, the programme reinforces York's status as the UK's only UNESCO City of Media Arts, enhancing the city's national and international profile.

6. FEASIBILITY REPORT SUMMARY

This feasibility study has validated the significant demand and strategic opportunity for Combine/Harvest in York and North Yorkshire. The consultation process confirmed a high level of regional stakeholder buy-in and enthusiasm and identified a clear alignment with the Mayoral Combined Authority's growth objectives.

A highly skilled and experienced delivery team is in place, ensuring the project is ready for immediate implementation. The programme framework is well established, allowing for responsive development and customisation depending on the specific recruitment needs and opportunities identified in each location at the time of delivery.

Tom Higham, Creative Director | Mediale

Tom is Creative Director of Mediale, a digital arts commissioning organisation based in Selby, North Yorkshire. Mediale exists to support, push forward, and develop digital arts in the UK and beyond. Tom leads programmes working at the intersection of art, technology, and place, commissioning artists whose practice is embedded in that territory. Mediale operates nationally and regionally, with particular focus on immersive and critical work.

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John Rose-Adams, Co-Director | York Creatives

John serves as Chair and Co-Director of York Creatives CIC, a community-led social enterprise dedicated to strengthening the creative industries of York. He is also Associate Director (Innovation and R&D) for XR Stories at The University of York. John's work focuses on boosting regional collaboration, fostering innovation, and positioning York and North Yorkshire as a beacon of creativity in a modern, inclusive economy.



Mediale

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