

Let's Create
Change:
Artistic
Freedom in
a Time of
Genocide
and Rising
Fascism

QUEERCIRCLE

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Foreword

What is our role as cultural institutions within society? This is not a rhetorical question. It is one that every one of us, particularly those of us in leadership positions, must urgently and seriously contend with.

When QUEERCIRCLE opened its doors in 2022, we entered a self-defined period of experimentation in an effort to wrestle with this question. We wanted to understand, not just in theory but in practice, what it means to build a cultural space that is politically conscious, socially engaged, and structurally accountable. This question has become ever more urgent as we witness a genocide unfold in Palestine.

While artists and cultural workers have mobilised by removing their works from exhibitions and collections, or through solidarity initiatives like [Artists for Palestine UK](#), [Cultural Workers Against Genocide](#), and [Strike Outset](#), much of the UK's cultural and political establishment has responded with silence, complicity, or active suppression of dissent.

At QUEERCIRCLE, we haven't always got our acts of solidarity right, but we have allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, to listen, to learn, and to remain transparent with our communities throughout. That vulnerability has been met with grace, generosity, and solidarity. We've seen first-hand how, when institutions let go of the need to appear authoritative or "neutral", our artists and communities will show us the way. The clearest and most effective act of solidarity we can all take, in our view, is to join [The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel \(PACBI\)](#), which QUEERCIRCLE, among many other organisations, is committed to.

Building trust through shared struggle has helped us to remain steadfast in our commitments, even as we have faced funding challenges, questioning by the Charity Commission, and targeted attacks from the media. These pressures are not isolated. They are part of a broader, escalating effort to intimidate and silence those who speak out against occupation, apartheid, and genocide. The same systems enable the targeting of trans people, the erosion of public space, and the global rise of fascism. These struggles are interconnected—and so too must be our response. This report is solidarity in action; a collective effort of many within the sector who are boldly working for change. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved.

Egyptian-Canadian author Omar El Akkad wrote: “One day, everyone will have always been against this.” ↗ Until then, this report, *Let's Create Change*, is both a record and a refusal.

It documents how cultural institutions are increasingly being pushed to choose between funding and values. It examines the cost of maintaining integrity in an increasingly hostile climate. And it calls for institutions—especially those of us in leadership—to let go of the illusion of neutrality, and instead embrace the difficult, necessary work of reimagining our role in civic society and protecting freedom of expression.

To our peers across the UK's cultural landscape: What kind of institutions are we building? Who are they for? What are we willing to risk in defence of our values—and who might we become if we chose to trust our communities more deeply?

We do not offer this report as a definitive answer. We offer it as a provocation and a resource for organisations—like us—whose objectives are to support artists, promote respect for diversity in the arts, and who are committed to building strong communities. Our hope is that it offers courage, especially to those feeling uncertain, exposed, or afraid. There is strength in vulnerability. We do not need to know all the answers. Our artists, our audiences, and our communities are already leading the way.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'AJ', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Ashley Joiner
Director of QUEERCIRCLE

Executive Summary

Let's Create Change sets out to examine if, when, and how people working for visual arts organisations in England have felt pressure, or been pressured, to (self-)censor due to a lack of freedom of speech and expression.

Responding, at least in part, to Arts Council England's *Let's Create 7* (2020–2030) strategy, it presents a detailed analysis of results from our survey of people working in the sector, either for institutions or organisations, or as freelancers.

Let's Create Change is mainly concerned with understanding how arts organisations and arts workers have been discouraged from showing or making work—particularly if it relates to Palestine or trans rights, or criticises Anglo-American foreign policy. Thinking about top-down forms of censorship, it looks at the forces that have sought to silence them: governments; cultural institutions; external funders, whose influence has grown after years of austerity; pro-Israel and/or trans-exclusionary lobby groups; and the media, especially newspapers and broadcast networks.

Given the extreme violence wrought upon the Palestinians for decades, but especially in the last two years, this topic has inevitably dominated conversations about censorship amongst arts workers. Our research confirms that organisations have been given conflicting directions when staging cultural interventions around the Russian invasion of Ukraine, to when they have expressed opposition to Israel's occupation of Palestine.

This report does not only study this issue, but thinks about how expressing support for any group of people targeted by the UK government, media establishment or other right-wing forces—from Keir Starmer’s Labour to Nigel Farage’s Reform or Tommy Robinson’s “Unite the Kingdom” movement—is to make oneself a target for increasingly stringent policing and censorship, especially as far-right movements rise and embolden each other internationally.

Our findings present a different set of threats to artistic freedom of speech than those reported in the media or discussed in Parliament. 72% of our respondents found inconsistencies in how principles of free speech are applied and policed within their organisations, whilst 55% said their organisation and communities have been affected by Arts Council England’s guidance about statements “including matters of political debate”.

Let’s Create Change aims to build an honest picture of how and why artists and organisations are being censored, within the context of Britain in the 21st century. By writing and publishing it, we hope to foster a more open discussion that can reflect on the most pressing forms of censorship impacting artists and arts organisations.

Preface

In recent decades, the question of freedom of speech—the right of people to say what they think, share information, ask for change, disagree with people in power, and to peacefully protest—has become increasingly vexed, with the terms of its discussion largely set by the political right.

Relying on narratives repeated in newspapers and on television or radio about the censorious nature of “political correctness”—or its successor term, “wokeness”—the story pushed is usually that of a brave individual whose unfashionable conservative opinions are “silenced” by what they call “mobs”. These online “mobs”, we are told, press an elite group of liberal-left gatekeepers into denying them platforms, in what they call “cancel culture”—in statements often made through media channels with huge funding and reach, whose editorial positions align with their own.

As well as misrepresenting their own levels of power and influence, this discourse prioritises the individual over the collective. Meanwhile, freedom from the oppression for which they often advocate, within this discourse, is never considered as a valid demand.

These forces are structural, lying at the heart of how “freedom” is understood, mediated and policed, with powerful actors working with government, whichever party is in power, and the media (as discussed at the Leveson Inquiry in 2011-12) to stifle freedom of speech and expression, in what has traditionally been one of its most important vectors—the arts.

Many recent examples of “top-down” censorship have been widely publicised, including: the Barbican censoring a [discussion](#) of Palestinian community radio, for which they later apologised; Home in Manchester [pulling](#) an event showcasing Palestinian writers, again, the subject of an apology and the event was reinstated; and the Arnolfini in Bristol cancelling two Bristol Palestine Film Festival events, leading to a [boycott](#) and the resignation of its executive director. Artists and organisations supporting calls from the Palestinian Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) Movement have been subject to direct and pervasive forms of suppression and censorship.

The need to silence critics has been well understood by the Israeli government and its army, who are doing so by force. In August 2025, The Independent [reported](#) that at least 245 journalists had been killed in Gaza since October 2023, publishing an incomplete list. By the end of 2023, Israel had killed numerous artists and creative writers, including Refaat Alareer, Inas al-Saqa, Nour al-Din Hajjaj, Saleem Al-Naffar and Heba Abu Nada. Since then, the Israeli Defence Forces have continued to destroy cultural institutions and universities.

It is important to note that forms of censorship have been enacted across various adjacent fields to the cultural sector: in higher education, the media, and even governmental bodies themselves, reportedly including the [civil service](#). [Showing how legacy media is entangled with the state and its foreign policy, Novara Media’s analysis](#) of online articles in the Guardian, Mirror and Independent between October 2023 and March 2024 found that even so-called “progressive” outlets showed bias, siding with Israel over Palestine.

There is also growing concern regarding the prevalence of transphobia in public discourse in the UK, both in politics, and the media. At the time of writing, the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security ⁷ have raised a red alert about the situation in the UK after the Supreme Court ruling on the Equality Act 2010 and subsequent Equality & Human Rights Commission (EHRC) guidance, which functions to exclude trans people from public life.

However, the most recent and prominent report on cultural censorship has come from the right: *Afraid to Speak Freely*, ⁸ commissioned by the political pressure group, Freedom in the Arts (FITA), and published in 2025. Presented as “neutral”, it was written by Rosie Kay, Denise Fahmy and Professor Jo Phoenix, all of whom call themselves “gender critical”. *Afraid to Speak Freely* highlights how “politically sensitive topics—such as gender identity, Israel-Palestine, and race—have become virtually off-limits, undermining the open debate and creative risk-taking that define the arts”. Given how closely their position aligns with the editorial stances of the UK’s legacy media, it is no surprise that their report has received extensive coverage.

Let’s Create Change acknowledges horizontal pressures, from audiences and peers, as set out by FITA; like *Afraid to Speak Freely*, it calls for fewer restraints on freedom of expression. But our report looks at how the opposite stances to those highlighted in their report—support for the Palestinian people, trans rights, and grassroots anti-racist movements—have been demonised and delegitimised. It comes months after the Department for Culture, Media and Sport asked Baroness Hodge to lead a formal review of Arts Council England, looking at its “strategic objectives, working relationships and partnerships, and the relationship between ACE and government”. (At the time of writing, the results were due to be published). Despite this potentially being a welcome step, there is reason for caution about its independence, given Hodge’s long-standing association with Labour’s right-wing faction ⁹ and Labour Friends of Israel. ¹⁰

Methodology

Let's Create Change is the collective effort of a working group formed over the last two years. We collectively designed a survey to collect qualitative and quantitative data on the pressure points on cultural workers in a range of arts and cultural institutions. As well as asking participants to explain the difficulties they faced, we invited suggestions for change.

Aware that respondents might be reprimanded, sacked, or blacklisted if they were to be identified, we sent out an anonymous online survey to a range of stakeholders, mindful to ensure the safety and confidentiality of contributors willing to disclose their particular pressures.

These included those who take up various roles—be they directors/board members, or cultural workers, including contracted workers and freelancers. We decided not to survey artists. Artists have been the first to mobilise, we therefore felt it was our responsibility as cultural workers to interrogate the systems in which we operate and, in some cases, have created or reinforced.

Contributions were gathered via a survey which was distributed by email via the working group's existing networks. Contributors could answer as many of the questions as they wished, adding extra contextual information if they felt it necessary. In total, we had 44 respondents, who kept their details anonymous but gave detailed responses.

Let's Create Change sets out the context for forms of censorship within the arts sector, which—though often indirect—create a forbidding environment in which our more detailed survey responses can be seen and judged.

Analysis

Many respondents shared concerns about how expressions of solidarity with Palestine had been suppressed or undermined, a longstanding issue that has intensified since October 2023. Far more pressure came from higher up in their organisations, or externally—from funders, or local or national media—than from colleagues. They reported other issues as well: structural racism and ableism within institutions; funders refusing to back work on gay men’s health or drug user advocacy; and transphobia, noting that lobbying groups who claimed to support free speech often agitated against supporters of trans rights. Thus, our findings present a very different set of threats to artistic freedom of speech or expression than has often been reported in the media or discussed in Parliament. We present these findings, and their context, across three sections: Censorship and Freedom of Expression; The Weaponisation of Funding; and External Pressure from the Media and Lobby Groups.

There has been cause for alarm about government restrictions on freedom of expression since the early 2000s, when Tony Blair's Labour administration passed the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001 and the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003. These laws extended the powers of the police to charge citizens for undefined offences against the state or their communities. The Labour party's heavy-handed attitude was made literal at their conference in 2005, when 82-year-old member Walter Wolfgang was thrown out, and detained under the 2001 Act, ↗ for heckling Blair over the Iraq War. Blair also introduced the Prevent strategy to combat "radicalisation"; the Conservatives turned this into a statutory duty for public bodies to report people of concern in 2015. The policy has been criticised for demonising Muslims and targeting their communities. Since the 2019 general election, there have been numerous laws passed to restrict protest, making it harder to participate, and intensifying punishments for anyone found guilty under legislation such as the Police, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Act 2022 or the Public Order Act 2023.

These Acts were originally intended to curb the influence of environmental groups such as Extinction Rebellion or Just Stop Oil: the Public Order Act specifically granted new powers to the police to prevent protests outside oil, gas and energy suppliers. It introduced banning orders to stop individuals from attending protests at all, and lowered the threshold for the police to detain people—several who held anti-monarchy placards during Charles III's royal visits were arrested in September 2022, with 64 individuals arrested during the coronation in May 2023. ↗ This attack on freedom of speech was not as violent as the Metropolitan Police handcuffing and arresting women at a vigil for Sarah Everard, who was murdered by a serving officer, in March 2021. (The Metropolitan police later apologised and paid "substantial" damages). ↗ All this was sufficient for five UN Special Rapporteurs to write to the UK government ↗ in

December 2022 about “undue and grave restrictions on the exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and expression”.

Although British governments have sought to quell criticism of their foreign policy positions for centuries (for example, in the cases of Ireland and India, and more recently of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere), anxieties over censorship and authoritarianism in the UK have significantly heightened since October 2023. This is an issue on which the last two governing parties, Conservative and Labour, and their supporting media outlets, have been out of line with a huge section of the British public, with more than thirty mass demonstrations in London. On 11 November 2023, 300,000 people assembled to demand an end to the genocide, a cessation of military supplies to Israel, and recognition of a Palestinian state, which was eventually made, although without any significant arms embargo. Other protests have taken place all over the country, from Aberdeen to the Channel Islands.

On 30 October 2023, Home Secretary Suella Braverman labelled these protests “hate marches”, linking pro-Palestinian chants and symbols with antisemitism and terrorism. In February 2024, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the protests were “threatening to replace democracy with mob rule”, [7](#) a year after his government introduced the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill, intended to ban councils and government bodies from divesting in companies involved in Israel’s occupation, or fossil fuels. The Bill had not passed by summer 2024, when Sunak called an election, and was heavily defeated. The incoming Labour government has not yet passed the Bill, but nor has it made any attempt to repeal the recently introduced police powers. Rather, it has been just as authoritarian, proscribing the non-violent Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation, making declarations of support for it illegal—[474](#) were [7](#) arrested at a demonstration of support in London in August 2025, and [890](#) at a larger demonstration [7](#) in September.

In the education sector, many in leadership roles at universities moved to crush student support for a ceasefire and displays of solidarity with Palestine. As in the US and elsewhere, these often took the form of encampments: at one point, in 2024, there were 36 in the UK. Some universities began disciplinary proceedings ↗ against sympathisers: 28 have launched investigations into their staff and students for pro-Palestine activism, ↗ with at least nine being briefed on protests by private intelligence and security companies. Advocacy group CAGE International found 118 instances of UK primary and secondary schools, and sixth form colleges, cracking down on expressions of Palestinian solidarity, ↗ including an increase in Prevent referrals, suspensions and exclusions, disproportionately targeting those of Muslim backgrounds. In the context of both Conservative and Labour governments talking about the need to ensure “freedom of speech” at universities—in practice making it harder for students to demonstrate against pro-Israel or anti-trans speakers—the selective application of this principle could not be more obvious. Our respondents had also noted the inconsistencies in this worldview, and how they had become manifest in the arts industry.

Have you noticed any inconsistencies around how principles of free speech are applied and policed, depending on the subject(s) under discussion?

Yes: 71.8%

No: 28.2%

Regarding the bad faith use of freedom of speech—e.g. to insulate certain positions from criticism while casting others as inherently censorious, and thus deserving of having their influence curtailed—our respondents had a range of thoughts about their organisations. Several felt that statements on anti-racism and liberation, or in support of refugees, were disingenuous, as their principles did not extend to support for Gaza, when employers suddenly worried about “taking a side” in a way they had not regarding (for example) Ukraine.

There is a lot of conflation around ‘political’ stances. I was dismayed that my previous employer felt comfortable in writing a statement about Ukraine and also an anti-racist statement (none of this they have upheld), yet they refused to acknowledge the situation in Gaza as it was deemed to be ‘taking a side’.

My organisation made several statements about the war in Ukraine but has said nothing about the other conflicts happening concurrently, notably the genocide in Gaza and throughout Palestine. You can’t use the word genocide in relation to Israel/Palestine but you could say it about other world events unquestioned before the present moment.

One said there were “too many caveats” as “you can say what you want as long as it doesn’t upset stakeholders”; the financial and social composition of boards (who “tend to be very ‘pale, male and stale’ unless concerted action is taken to ensure otherwise”) was a huge constraint. The idea that organisations could be “neutral” came into question: a respondent said the current “political neutrality” of institutions “leads to staff and artists being put in harm’s way”, as it stops them from being able to stand behind the people and works they apparently support.

These responses highlight how inconsistent guidance renders our institutions unfit for their purpose as spaces to explore urgent ideas, and as collective spaces to work through the challenges of our times.

Have you ever been told that expressing a certain opinion on an issue (either personally, or in your work) will raise objections from a trustee or trustees?



One respondent said, “It’s very difficult to express our own opinion especially when it comes to more political issues.” One other troubling response highlighted “many occasions” where a respondent was “directly asked to offer opinions from my ‘lived experience as a Black woman,’ and was then told that ‘I was being too political, hyper-critical, making trouble’, etc.”. While another said that “as a freelancer I haven’t felt secure enough to talk about Palestine when senior staff or people in leadership are present.”

Many respondents had experienced such treatment. At times, it was pre-emptive, as simple as a director warning a staff member “not to assume everyone shares your views”, which “had a censorious effect”. One respondent, in a directorial role, said:

The board raised concern over my personal political activities, work and opinions, and how it presents itself in my professional work (i.e., themes explored / artists who I have worked with). I was indirectly accused of being antisemitic for my public criticism of Israel and was also threatened that I would not be successful in fundraising for the organisation I was now accountable for. Funders did stop supporting the charity as a direct outcome of this one board member’s opinion of me and my political views.

Another said they were told not to use the organisation’s name in a fundraiser for Gaza “as board members and the chair hold Zionist views and work closely with UK Lawyers for Israel” (UKLFI), even though they had recently hosted a successful fundraiser for Ukraine.

Respondents—whatever their level—were often reprimanded for any statement in support of Palestine, with one director being told to publish a formal apology. Another respondent was told “a certain narrative” had to be presented, casting “both sides” as “victims of violence” when apologising for any “offence” caused by a social media post—this decision

was made by the board. Another was told not to use certain words and phrases about the genocide in Palestine: “I have been asked to reframe active language in passive tone and/or ‘reference/cite’ material that in other circumstances would be permissible”. They added:

Even with my workplace and its senior management team/board of directors being broadly pro-Palestine, there is an atmosphere that speaking around the genocide rather than naming it directly is preferable and when [the Board of Directors] are consulted, time, obfuscation and a lack of clarity hinder any positive action.

Several respondents reported higher-level interference in projects about Palestine, ranging from trustees arguing over whether to add a warning label to work that referenced it, or saying in board meetings that public programming with Palestinian artists “would be considered contentious” and “could not be justified against charitable objectives”, suggesting a “friends-only, closed event” instead. This resonated with another respondent who said requests not to pursue projects are always made “in the language of pragmatism and capacity”, with trustees worried about the Charity Commission, and “the impact on their own futures elsewhere” that might arise from being reported.

One respondent said there were many occasions where senior management approved a completed project, but trustees demanded changes before it opened. Another respondent said trustees’ concerns about their reputations, and their implicit siding with Israel, came across in their “attempts to remove or censor” works, suggestions on the interpretation that should accompany it, and “the creation of a trustee statement ... in which they essentially distanced themselves from the views of the artist and the exhibition”. Another said they had been asked to defend support of Palestine in 1:1 calls with trustees.

THE WEAPONISATION OF FUNDING

Arts Council England's (ACE) strategy, *Let's Create*, (2020–2030), [7](#) promised to champion and uphold artistic freedom and expression, making England “a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish”.

In January 2024, ACE made controversial updates to its Relationship Framework for National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs). This focused on the “reputational risk” associated with “overtly political or activist” statements, warning that “output that might be deemed controversial” potentially threatened funding for recipients.

This update met with widespread concern. [An open letter](#) [7](#) from Artists' Union England (AUE) expressed how “the impact of these guidelines could censor artists' freedom of expression”. ACE insisted it was not intended to do so, saying it had been misinterpreted. Equity, the performing arts and entertainment trade union, submitted a [Freedom of Information request](#) [7](#) about the origins of the guidance and found that, contrary to ACE's denial that it related to the war, it was discussed at an ACE meeting with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on 12 December 2023, under “reputational risk relating to Israel-Gaza conflict”. ACE subsequently clarified that it “will not remove or refuse funding to an organisation or an individual purely because they make work that is political”.

Has the Arts Council England guidance about statements “including matters of political debate” affected your organisation and its communities?

Yes: 55%

No: 45%

This guidance clearly affected our respondents and their organisations, who worried more about funding. One said it had “enhanced a fearful climate in which any presentation of political views must be weighed up in advance with a lot more risk assessment and care” and has had an “inhibiting effect”.

One respondent said:

I’m a freelancer who has seen how straightforward and transparent the decision making is when it comes to making statements of support for Palestine in non-ACE funded venues (which we have done without resistance or hesitation from the venue) compared to attempting to make even minor shows of support in venues that receive ACE funding. In ACE funded venues, even if the leadership are sympathetic, they are too scared to let artists make statements or show solidarity within our work or post-show.

One respondent, concerned about ACE being used as a “propaganda machine”, wrote:

Just four years after the Black Lives Matter movement, and subsequent guidance for organisations, the inconsistent messaging around political support (Palestine vs. Ukraine for instance) showed that racism is still a systemic issue. For those of us who primarily work with marginalised communities, we are all too aware of how this can quickly have a negative impact on those who are already facing compounding discrimination.

Another said their communities felt tension between “the inherently political nature of their socially engaged work and the challenges of speaking about live political situations (Palestine, Supreme Court, immigration etc.)” but was not sure ACE was a driver for that anxiety, thinking it was “more connected with the government and its crackdown on protest”. This shows how the wider context is important in considering the specific impact of ACE advice.

Such concerns undermine the vital claim, made at its inception in 1946, that ACE protects artists and arts organisations from direct government interference. This was to be achieved by keeping Arts Council of Britain (as it was then termed) at an “arm’s length” distance from government, meaning it should operate with some autonomy from the department that sponsors it (which is currently DCMS). According to one respondent to our survey, that distance has since shortened to that of a “fist”.

Have you ever been told that expressing a certain opinion on an issue (either personally, or in your work) might cause funding to be lost?



One respondent said some funders had expressed nervousness about any programme relating to Palestine, “seeking clarification and asking more questions than usual”. Intriguingly, another said that funders advised their organisation “not to focus on climate issues” as these were “not a core function” and seen as “mission creep”, but that this was not an instruction, and did not deter them from such work.

In other instances, funders asked a worker to reconsider a draft proposal they considered “too difficult” for their visitors, pushing their reservations about political content onto the (imagined) viewers, and suggested programmes were “less likely to be funded if they were ‘too focused on speaking truth to power’”.

Respondents were also told to be careful about being too transparent about their ethical approach to fundraising as it “may ‘deter’ funders”. One person noted that the fear of losing funding had been supplanted by references to the impact of possible lengthy legal proceedings, which had a similar chilling effect:

For a long time, there was a constant fear that making what were being called ‘political statements’ could result in a loss of, or non-renewal of regular funding. This has recently been replaced with a narrative that the onslaught of unending legal battles would overwhelm staff capacity, effectively doing the same thing.

Again, Palestine was a flashpoint: workers wanting to sign up to BDS (the Palestinian campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) and drop sponsors supportive of the Israeli government, faced resistance. One organisation had a director discuss exhibition funding with a funder with “strong ties” to the Israeli government, despite the curatorial team’s objections—their protests were ignored, and the organisation chose to take the funding, accepting the consequence that some artists withdrew their works from the show.

EXTERNAL PRESSURES FROM THE MEDIA AND LOBBY GROUPS

Pressure on artists and organisations often came from lobbying groups and the media. Sometimes, this was done over social media, to demand the removal of posts supportive of Palestine, or by emailing trustees directly to complain about such material and threaten further action, such as campaigning outside a venue.

There have been other ways to discourage artists and organisations from speaking out. The use of social media for surveillance could be pernicious, with pro-Israel groups following respondents on Instagram or elsewhere. At other times, it was more direct: one respondent mentioned a colleague being questioned over statements made online; another said a senior curator logged into a colleague's laptop and social media accounts.

One organisation reported an occasion where a planned education course (on the history of Palestine) had been “flagged up as a Palestine event”, leading to six uniformed police officers entering their offices, saying “we wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't investigate”. Staff explained that this was not a protest but a public, community learning activity; nonetheless, they saw two officers patrolling the area shortly before it was due to start.

Artists reported that organisations that might previously shelve pro-Palestine events after receiving complaints, now pre-emptively cancelled things more often and more openly, but rates of censorship ↗ were hard to quantify as artists were dropped before an event became public.

Anonymous individuals and lobbyists complained to the Charity Commission and to the press. The Board of Deputies of British Jews are also quoted in articles ↗ calling for the removal of artworks from the Royal Academy's Young Artists' Summer Show. One respondent mentioned an outlet

publishing stories based on complaints without verifying details with their organisation.

The role of the press—particularly newspapers—came up repeatedly, mainly, but not only, in intimidating critics of Israel. One respondent said an article published about one of their members was “very deleterious to the health of the people concerned and the communities they were supporting”.

One respondent said their organisation was mentioned in an article about how public money should not be used to support LGBTQIA+ young people, tying them into a long-running media trope about “ideological” uses of taxpayer money, which has been used to pressurise national governments and local councils into withdrawing support for LGBTQIA+ people.

(Notoriously, that same trope fed into Section 28—the law against public bodies “promoting homosexuality”—in 1988.)

Another respondent said “we have been featured in a leading British newspaper as an example of the irresponsible use of money”—the fact that the article “got the details wrong” did not diminish the “conscious and unconscious” climate of fear it generated around their work.

Have lobbying groups ever targeted your organisation, either through private communications, picket, or by talking to the media?



Has your organisation ever been reported to the Charity Commission?



Survey data reflects that organisations that had made statements about Gaza and/or in support of Palestine were reported to the Charity Commission by UKLFI.

Several respondents told us that vexatious reports to the Charity Commission caused them serious problems, with one saying it cost their organisation about £4,000 and took “a huge amount of time to address”.

Another organisation reported after issuing a statement in support of Palestine said the process took three months—the Commission found no fault and suggested “new policies” for them. “It had a lasting impact on the mental health of the team, and how we communicated with our audience due to self-censorship.”

Another said a report “had a very negative impact on the organisation to the extent where many of us wondered whether to resign, stirring up an intense debate between board, director and staff”, with some having to take time off work as a result. Another said they were reported to the Commission for a statement in support of Gaza by “members of a loose group supposedly campaigning for freedom in the arts”.

In July 2025, the Commission confirmed that it would investigate UKLFI’s charitable wing after CAGE International produced a report ⁷ about how UKLFI and the Campaign Against Antisemitism had “weaponised regulatory frameworks and vexatious lawfare to stifle free speech and pro-Palestinian activism in the UK”. The CAA is yet to respond but a spokesperson for UKLFI Charitable Trust reportedly said ⁷ it had not received any information about the complaint. We await the outcome with interest.

Conclusion

The findings presented in *Let's Create Change* demonstrate that the pressures shaping the culture sector in the UK are structural. Respondents described a climate in which freedom of expression has become conditional; dependent on trustees' sensibilities, funders' risk assessments, and an increasingly politicised media environment.

As one participant put it, “you can say what you want as long as it doesn’t upset stakeholders.” Others spoke of being told to “reframe active language in passive tone,” or to avoid words such as “genocide” altogether. Taken together, these accounts show how fear of reputational damage has replaced freedom of expression.

This culture of self-censorship reflects the wider narrowing of civic space in the UK, where protest and public assembly have been restricted by successive laws—the Police, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Act (2022) and the Public Order Act (2023) among them.

As several respondents noted, anxieties around “taking a side” within arts organisations echo the language used by successive governments to criminalise dissent. The same frameworks that suppress political demonstration also shape the conditions under which artists and institutions operate, with the arts serving as both a mirror to, and a casualty of, broader democratic erosion.

The weaponisation of funding has deepened this insecurity. At a time when the arts are experiencing ongoing cuts, over half of respondents said they feared losing financial support if they expressed solidarity with Palestine or engaged with contested political issues. Ambiguity in Arts Council England's guidance and the Charity Commission's guidance on political activity has intensified this tension.

Yet, as others pointed out, these experiences have sometimes generated new conversations about integrity and accountability. Respondents who wondered if they might have to resign concluded that "it allowed conversation to unfold that would never have been possible otherwise", leaving them with "a clearer idea of the remit of a charity and what we are able to do within this framework", and "feeling more empowered and connected".

In the next section we make recommendations for the sector which may further this progress.

What Might Change?

We concluded by asking: What would our respondents like their organisations to change? What would they like to see change on a local or government level? What other support (e.g., training or resources) they might need.

There was pessimism about change at a governmental level, given how difficult it has been to distinguish Labour policy from their Conservative predecessors, and polling suggesting the next government will be led by the far-right Reform. Responsibility, therefore, falls to the sector to mobilise and organise to implement these recommendations.

Primarily, respondents wanted less interference from government, a less prescriptive form of arts funding “including but not limited to political censorship” and fewer administrative processes in management.

One person concludes that:

I wish for a better understanding that pressure on and attempts to curtail freedom of expression is bad for business here. Ultimately, the more restrictive things get, the less relevant and pioneering art will come out of the UK.

Many of their suggestions involved political education, training on how to discuss issues, and workshops on how to understand the (constantly changing) British legal framework around political expression in the arts, giving arts workers better knowledge of how organisation structures function.

Most of all, respondents wanted an end to a culture in which ambiguity is fostered, deliberately or not, that can be exploited by internal or external actors for nefarious means.

Below we make recommendations for legal and governmental reform that the sector should consider mobilising around. We then make recommendations that institutions—arts and otherwise—could implement on their own terms or collectively.

Recommendations

1. LEGAL AND GOVERNMENTAL REFORM

- 1.1 End political censorship in funding: ensure that arts funding bodies operate independently and are free from government interference, as protected under Council of Europe and UNESCO conventions on artistic freedom.
- 1.2 Review and reform the complaints process of the Charity Commission to prevent frivolous and vexatious complaints.
- 1.3 Review Arts Council England's and other funders' risk registers, implementing transparent decision-making processes, appeals and community panels.

2. INSTITUTIONAL INDEPENDENCE AND GOVERNANCE

2.1 Legal and contractual guarantees: standardise contract clauses that protect artists' and arts workers' right to free expression, especially on political or human-rights issues without fear of reprisal or funding loss.

2.2 Adopt clear policies: introduce memoranda of understanding or codes of conduct that ensure trustees and funders' participation in decisions about artistic programming and political expression is objective, and free from conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise. This would allow for furtherance of each organisation's goals without a selective suppression of perspectives.

2.3 Adopt ethical and transparent fundraising and financial practices which reject sponsorships, partnerships, or any form of funding from individuals, corporations, or institutions that are verifiably complicit in violations of international law—including genocide, ecological destruction, or any other form of violence.

2.4 Endorse the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic, and Cultural Boycott of Israel.

3. TRAINING, AWARENESS AND SECTOR RESILIENCE

3.1 Introduce political-literacy and legal-rights training: equip culture workers and boards with knowledge of the UK Charity Commission's requirements, and legal frameworks around political activity, assembly and expression.

Respondents

UK Lawyers for Israel, Arts Council England and Campaign Against Antisemitism were contacted for comment.

UK Lawyers for Israel responded as follow:

- “We do not report organisations merely because they make statements about Gaza or in support of Palestine. We report organisations if they promote terrorism or racial hatred, or exclude or cancel people because they are Jewish, Israeli or Zionist, or engage in activities outside their charitable objects.”
- “The Charity Commission said it had added CAGE International’s complaint to an ongoing engagement they had with UKLFI Charitable Trust.”
- “We have still not seen a copy of CAGE International’s complaint to the Charity Commission, although we have seen a “report” published by CAGE International referring to UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI).”

An Arts Council England spokesperson said:

- “Arts Council England supports, unequivocally, artistic freedom of expression, and the right of artists to make work that is challenging, provoking, and indeed, political. This is a belief that colleagues at the Arts Council hold fast, and hold dear, as we know artists, and other colleagues do within the cultural sector.”
- “We want to be clear that the Government did not request that we publish guidance on this issue. The update we made to the Relationship Framework in January 2024 followed conversations with organisations we invest in, many of which were looking for support in managing complex situations. We updated Department for Culture, Media and Sport, our sponsor department in Government, that we were already in the process of drafting this additional guidance in one of our regular meetings. This is standard practice, and DCMS offered no input.”

Campaign Against Antisemitism did not respond.

ABOUT QUEERCIRCLE

QUEERCIRCLE is a CIO and Registered Charity (number 1194564).

QUEERCIRCLE is an LGBTQIA+ led charity working at the intersection of arts, health, and social action. Established in 2017 in response to the closure of queer spaces across the UK.

QUEERCIRCLE has become a leading platform for LGBTQIA+ artists and communities driving systemic change. Guided by the belief in the radical potential of the arts.

QUEERCIRCLE builds infrastructures that empower LGBTQIA+ people to lead creative, collective, and societal transformation.

QUEERCIRCLE.ORG

CONTACT US

To contact QUEERCIRCLE, please visit queercircle.org/contact/form ↗

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ARTISTIC FREEDOM IN A TIME OF
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