

Cultural institutions in the UK face an existential crisis, with Labour government worsening austerity

Richard Tyler
3 January 2025

Cultural institutions in the UK face an existential crisis as local authorities cut arts funding to try and manage their budget shortfalls. This is leading to the proposed closure of numerous theatres and museums. The situation is not unique to a specific region but is widespread, impacting communities across the country.

Cannock Chase District Council's decision to close the Museum of Cannock Chase and the Prince of Wales Theatre by April 2025 exemplifies this issue. The Labour Party-run council, facing a £1.3 million budget gap in 2025-26, cites the need to protect essential services like waste collection and street cleaning as justification for the closures.

Council leader Tony Johnson said “responsible financial management” was required, otherwise there was a risk of “effectively going bankrupt” if alternative measures like increases in council tax or service reductions were not taken. While the council promises a consultation before a final decision in February, the potential loss of these cultural assets has sparked concern among local residents and those working in the sector.

The closure of the Prince of Wales Theatre, in particular, has drawn criticism from Equity, the trade union representing performers and stage managers. Equity has highlighted the immediate job losses resulting from the closure and the broader impact on the local arts scene, particularly for professional, amateur, and children's performing arts groups who rely on the theatre as a central hub.

Elsewhere, cuts at the Welsh National Opera (WNO) have prompted managers to consider making the orchestra part-time. A plan to slash its musicians' pay by 15 percent provoked action short of a strike last

September. The spring tour for 2025 has been reduced, with no performances in Llandudno or Bristol. The WNO's funding bodies—the Arts Council of Wales, run by the devolved Labour government, and the Arts Council of England, run from Westminster—have seen their budgets slashed by 40 and 30 percent respectively since 2010.

These are just two examples of a larger trend affecting the UK's cultural landscape. A report by the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) and UK Theatre paints a stark picture, revealing that 40 percent of theatres could close in the next five years without significant capital investment.

Rising production costs, coupled with a 48 percent decline in public investment in the arts over the past 14 years, have created a precarious situation for theatres, the report finds. It highlights the need for a £20 million investment to prevent museum closures, noting that 525 museums have already shut since 2000.

The Campaign for the Arts (CFTA) reveals a 50.4 percent drop in local authority cultural spending per head in England over the last 14 years—as billions were cut from budgets by mainly Labour Party-run local authorities on behalf of Conservative Party-led central government—with museums and galleries experiencing a 48 percent reduction and library services facing a 54 percent decrease. This decline in funding translates to reduced access to arts and culture for communities across the country, noted the CFTA.

The impact of the COVID pandemic on the arts saw venues close and thousands of workers lose their jobs. In music, performing, and visual arts, approximately 55,000 jobs were lost, representing a 30 percent decline in employment within these sectors. Just in the months

from February to September 2023, the UK lost 125 grassroots music venues. Of these, 76 closed permanently, and 72 ceased offering live music.

Over 30 cinemas permanently closed their doors between 2020 and 2022. In July 2024, operator Cineworld announced the closure of six cinemas as part of a restructuring plan. In December 2024, the company announced an additional six closures as part of its restructuring efforts.

The last Conservative government cut funding for cultural organisations in 2022/23 to £1.3 billion in Grant-in-Aid, marking a 30 percent decrease from the previous year, which itself had seen a 14 percent cut.

The Westminster Labour government is continuing austerity and the philistine trend of slashing arts funding, with Chancellor Rachel Reeves announcing after coming to office in July, “If we cannot afford it, we cannot do it.” In her October budget, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) budget was set at £2.37 billion, with day-to-day spending projected to fall by 1.5 percent in real terms. The following year, the total DCMS budget is expected to decrease to £2.28 billion, with day-to-day spending falling by a projected 3.5 percent in real terms.

Funding for arts and music education has also been massively reduced at all levels. In 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) reduced funding for higher education arts courses by nearly 50 percent. This funding freeze represented an even greater reduction in real terms.

The number of music education hubs decreased from 116 to 43 by September 2024, a reduction of 63 percent. Established under the National Plan for Music Education (NPME), launched in 2012, these hubs were meant to ensure that all children and young people have access to high-quality music education. The hubs bring together schools, local authorities, arts organizations, community groups, and other partners to provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach to music education in their areas.

The dismantling of arts education is sending enrolment numbers tumbling. With jobs and learning opportunities radically reducing, what incentive is there for children and young people to study music, for example?

The number of students taking A-level music in

England has dropped by 45 percent since 2010, with only 5,000 students enrolled in 2023. There has been a 36 percent decrease in students taking GCSE music in secondary school. Several universities have closed or downsized their music departments due to declining student numbers and financial pressures. Notable examples include Oxford Brookes University and the University of Kent.

As in all aspects of society, the impact of cultural cuts, coupled with rising prices, is hitting working-class families and young people the hardest. Over the past five years, ticket prices for cultural events in Britain have increased hugely. In 2023, they surged by 23 percent on average, following a 19 percent increase since the pandemic began.

The average ticket prices for the top 100 global tours reached £101 in 2023, up from £82 in 2022. High-profile artists have set new benchmarks, with VIP passes for Madonna’s “Celebration” tour priced at £1,306.75 and Beyoncé offering on-stage seating for her Renaissance concerts at £2,400.

The average top ticket price for plays in London’s West End rose by 50 percent between 2023 and 2024, increasing from £94 to £141. This sharp rise can only partly be attributed to productions featuring celebrity performers, which command higher prices.

Government spending on culture in Britain is a tiny fraction of overall spending: only 0.17 percent of GDP in 2023 and among the lowest rates in Europe, where the average is around four-and-a-half times higher—at a still-low 0.74 percent. In 2022, the UK ranked 22nd out of 25 European OECD nations in culture spending, both as a share of GDP and per capita.

But when it comes to spending on the military, Britain stands at the top of the list in absolute terms. In 2023, the UK spent \$75 billion on war and weapons of destruction, more than any other European OECD nation.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact