



MCR. Culture Awards 2025



MANCHESTER
CITY COUNCIL

#MCRCultureAwards

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Foreword

Councillor Garry Bridges

Deputy Leader,
Manchester City Council



As Deputy Leader and Lead for Culture in the city, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2025 Manchester Culture Awards.

The Awards are an important event in the city's calendar – an opportunity to take notice of and reflect on the impressive contribution that culture, heritage and the arts make to our city through the fantastic activities that take place across Manchester.

This year's entries certainly gave me and my fellow judges plenty to discuss, and we felt so inspired by the quality of work and the dedication of those nominated. In this programme you will find 50 amazing finalists who are here this evening, selected from nearly 400 nominations.

They bring to life the city's strategy – Always, Everywhere: Manchester's Cultural Ambition – demonstrating so many self-starters, volunteers, creative individuals and organisations invested in bringing people together, sharing experiences and deepening our understanding of one another and the world around us. Congratulations to them all!

We couldn't hold these Awards without the backing of our supporters and sponsors, and I want to offer my thanks to you all for making tonight possible.

I hope you all have a great evening. Don't forget to shout about all the achievements we'll hear of tonight, using #McrcultureAward



Hosts

DJ Paulette



Lee Baxter

Winner of the DJ Mag Top 100 Lifetime Achievement Award (November 2022), the Keychange (PRS) Inspiration Award (Sound City April 2023), the NTIA Ambassadors of The Night Award (March 2024), DJ of the Year (Nordoff and Robbins) Northern Music Awards 2024, and the Manchester Culture Awards – Inspiration Award 2024, DJ Paulette is certainly racking up the awards and plaudits.

She plays disco, house and techno to huge crowds in cool underground basements and is renowned for consistently ‘smashing’ every set she plays. Her second Essential Mix was broadcast on Radio One in February 2023. As an official ambassador and alumna of Manchester Metropolitan University, she is a mentor to Arts and Humanities degree students.

DJ Paulette also serves on the Regional Committee North and Live Committee of the Musicians Union. As an author, her debut book ‘Welcome To The Club: The life and lessons of a black woman DJ’ was published in January 2024 (paperback/audiobook in April 2025). DJ Paulette has recently started writing her second book and has been nominated for I Love Manchester’s Emmeline Pankhurst Award. She has also been permanently honoured by the City of Manchester with an official Akse-P19 mural in Deansgate (creator of the George Floyd, Ian Curtis, Marcus Rashford landmarks).

Reece Williams

Reece is a towering presence on the Northern spoken word and poetry scene. He joined poetry collective Young Identity in 2007, performing across the UK and internationally with Saul Williams, Kae Tempest, The Last Poets and the late Amiri Baraka. In 2025, he took his debut solo show, *This Kind of Black*, on a national tour, performing to raucous audiences up and down the country.

He has worked on high-profile commissions for the Guardian and Penguin. The Guardian commissioned him to write about Len Johnson, a famous Manchester-born boxer and race activist. The poem was published as part of the newspaper's Cotton Capital series. Penguin commissioned Reece to write about Walter Tull, one of the first professional footballers of colour. The anthology was published in July 2023.

He is Curator, Legacies of Enslavement at the Science and Industry Museum and is the former Community Engagement Manager for Manchester UNESCO City of Literature. Reece is passionate about youth engagement, the arts and culture.



Audrey Albert

Judges

Councillor Garry Bridges

Garry is Deputy Leader of Manchester City Council. Born and raised in the city, he has a deep connection to its communities, advocating for policies that support vulnerable children and families. A former Executive Member for Children's Services, he sits on several boards within the Cultural sector and has been instrumental in bringing new and exciting opportunities to the city.

Known for his commitment to reducing inequality, Garry has prioritised educational access and mental health resources for young people. He is a strong supporter of the cultural sector in the city.

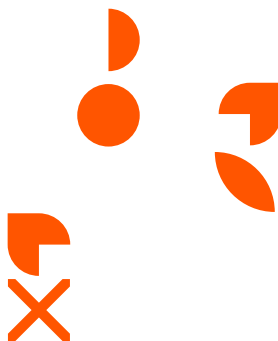


Sherelle Fairweather



Sherelle is Digital Strategy Lead at Manchester City Council, where she drives the citywide Doing Digital Together Strategy, exploring how technology intersects with place, people, and socioeconomic change. With a background in the arts and over a decade of experience in social impact across public and community sectors, she is passionate about the role of creativity, innovation and inclusion in shaping a fairer, more resilient city.

Sherelle champions collaboration in aiming to ensure Manchester's future is ethically and culturally rich. She also serves on the boards of Manchester Animation Festival and Community Arts Northwest, and chairs the Proper Job Theatre, supporting grass-roots creativity and cultural expression.



Sam Kalubowila



Sam is a Senior Relationship Manager at Arts Council England, shaping and supporting the delivery of Let's Create across Greater Manchester. Deeply rooted in the region's cultural and education sectors, he has worked closely with schools, colleges and universities to widen participation and champion creative opportunity.

London-born, and a graduate of Sheffield Hallam University, Sam moved to Manchester in 2005 to join the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Centre, an open-access library and archive dedicated to race and migration. He became a trustee of the Centre in 2025.

Passionate about creativity that reflects and empowers communities, Sam supports individuals and organisations to ensure art and culture thrive across the north west. Outside work, he's usually listening to techno and drawing cartoons with his children.



Andrew McMillan



Andrew is the author of three poetry collections: *Physical*, *Playtime*, and *Pandemonium*, as well as his novel, *Pity*. In 2022 he co-edited the acclaimed anthology *100 Queer Poems* with Mary Jean Chan. He has won a Somerset Maugham Award, an Eric Gregory Award and is the only poet to win the Guardian First Book Award.

Andrew is Professor of Contemporary Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University, where he co-leads poetry research, and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.



John Rooney

Originally from Belfast, John has lived and worked in Greater Manchester since 1990. He has widespread experience of working in local government with partners and communities to transform services and neighbourhoods. As Director of Neighbourhood Delivery at Manchester City Council, he is responsible for several services, including Libraries, Galleries, Culture, Events, Leisure, Parks, and Operational Services.



John is a Board member of the Manchester Libraries Trust and Sports City Management Company, and has always been a strong advocate for the role that culture plays in communities, improving wellbeing and supporting the visitor economy. John was delighted to be one of the judges again this year and was impressed by the quality and diversity of the short-listed nominations.

Eden-Haya Walters

Eden-Haya is an upcoming R&B artist and performer currently in her third year at the Royal Northern College of Music, where she studies Popular Music. Her musical journey began while studying at William Hulme Grammar School, where she discovered her passion for performing and songwriting. She was later part of the RNCM Young Artist programme and was interviewed on BBC Breakfast and BBC Radio about her work as a young musician.



Eden-Haya now works as a Student Mentor on the same programme, supporting and encouraging the next generation of young artists. Alongside her studies, she has performed at a range of venues across the UK, including Sony HQ in London. With a passion for youth work and community engagement, she continues to grow as both a performer and mentor, combining her love for music with a commitment to empower others through creativity. At the 2024 Manchester Culture Awards, Eden-Haya was named Young Creative of the Year.

Finalists

Making it Happen: Best Business Partnership



Change the Record

Brighter Sound and Sony Music

Empowering women and people of marginalised genders in music to develop leadership skills, resilience, and strong peer networks. Delivered by Brighter Sound with Sony Music's Social Justice Fund, the programme has been described by participants as 'life-changing', inspiring confidence and driving meaningful change across the industry.

The Hallé and Manchester City Football Club

This unique partnership of two of Manchester's major organisations provides a range of projects and support for the choir and musicians, and unique opportunities such as the Youth Choir performing as part of Champions League games. This collaboration allows the Hallé to continue building and developing local talent and offers new ways for both organisations to engage with Greater Manchester communities. Together, both the Hallé and City promote Manchester on the international stage as a world-class centre for culture and sport.



The Modernist App

The Modernist Society with Fablr Ltd

A free architectural heritage tour guide app showcasing Manchester's modernist buildings. A successful partnership between the Modernist Society, Fablr Ltd and GMCA, the app serves diverse audiences – from education to tourism. Featured in the Guardian, it brings the city's architectural identity to life.



Skills Bootcamp

Reform Radio and partners

A partnership of over forty organisations to supercharge participants' entry into the creative industries. Providing hands-on experience and real-world learning, the programme reached 130 participants and has already supported more than 100 people into work opportunities. A striking film celebrates this transformative collaboration.



The Best Performance

Dark Beautiful and Chaste

Captain's Leg Theatre Company

A brave and gripping piece of theatre using the real-life experiences of a group of women in Wythenshawe. Layers were gradually peeled away and the truth revealed in response to the question 'Is it easier to support a child than mend a broken adult?' The performance from Captain's Leg Theatre Company, with Marie Greenhalgh and Becky Kershaw, gave clear permission to the audience to explore the question further.



Spaced Out

The Edge Theatre

A celebration of creativity and talent, performed by The Edge's company of learning-disabled and professional actors, alongside their own community choir. While the story was set on the Moon, it shined a light on the hopes and struggles that unite us here on Earth. The show embodied the power of community, creativity and belonging, leaving audiences visibly moved.



Christmas Lights

Z-arts

A gentle, inclusive, immersive first theatre experience for ages 1–4. With sensory storytelling, original music, playful visuals, and integrated British Sign Language, little ones were mesmerised. Families joined performers in a magical snow-covered garden, sparking joy, connection and exploration together.



Chris Payne



LUCKY TONIGHT!

Afreena Islam-Wright

Afreena Islam-Wright's one-woman show performed at HOME and Gorton Community Centre made a positive impression on a range of audiences. LUCKY TONIGHT! blurred the lines between pub quiz and theatre, exploring identity, belonging, and British Bangladeshi heritage. "It didn't just entertain – it built community, sparked conversations, and left a lasting emotional impact."



Champions of Equality and Social Justice

Olympias Music Foundation

Addressing representation gaps and improving access to inclusive and exceptional music education, Olympias supported three Global Majority musicians to train as educators and deliver culturally rich music sessions to 24 children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project introduced Iranian, Senegalese and Indian musical traditions, culminating in a community performance.



Emerging Scholars

The Royal Exchange Theatre & the University of Manchester's Race, Roots & Resistance Collective

This research-led programme explored the Manchester Royal Exchange's links to transatlantic slavery and colonialism, with students on paid placement uncovering hidden histories and amplifying underrepresented voices. The partnership between the University of Manchester and the Royal Exchange Theatre deepens public understanding of Manchester's heritage and supports a more inclusive, reflective cultural narrative.

Afrocats

Delivery of multiple grass-roots projects supporting sanctuary seekers, refugees, and low-income families tackled exclusion through arts, advocacy and education, including programmes like Women Rising and Digital Empowerment. Their work enabled participants to access services, perform publicly, and build confidence, creating lasting change and inclusive opportunities across Manchester's cultural and civic spaces.



Be Your Own Human Rights Hero

RFK Human Rights

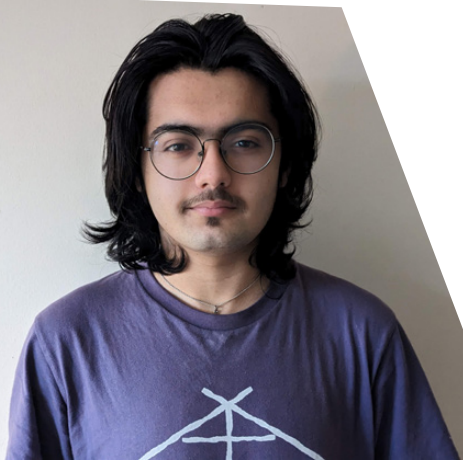
Following the legacy of Senator Robert F. Kennedy's 'Speak Truth to Power' philosophy, RFK teamed up with Manchester Libraries and over 300 children to engage in powerful human rights workshops and exhibitions. Through vibrant placards and soapbox events, young voices were amplified with passion and purpose, inspiring further school initiatives and a new generation of equality and justice champions.



Bright Spark: Young Creative of the Year

Tom Rabbani

Tom Rabbani is a rising music leader whose impact spans sound engineering, creative facilitation, and youth advocacy. Through Brighter Sound and WOMEX, he's championed inclusivity and inspired young people to engage with the music industry. Tom's leadership and passion have helped shape national conversations and opened doors for future creatives.



Callum Shallcross

Callum founded Flip the Script when he was 16 years old, determined to reshape who leads and tells stories in theatre. As CEO and Artistic Director, he delivers workshops to GCSE students and mentors young creatives, empowering them to lead with confidence, creativity and purpose.

Emelia Hewitt

Emelia is a neurodiverse artist whose six-month residency at Manchester Museum explored sustainable photography. Working with archives, staff and young people, she ran workshops and created innovative cameraless images using natural materials. Emelia's creativity, growth and commitment to inclusive practice inspired others and led to further commissions across the North.



Alfie Wright

Alfie is a talented young creative whose filmmaking and photography have uplifted peers at HOME Manchester. Volunteering during the 2024 summer programme, he documented the week in a moving short film, which he premiered to participants. Alfie leads with generosity, inspiring others and creating inclusive spaces for young people to thrive creatively.

Igniting Creativity: Culture, Education and Talent Development

Music Evermore CIC

Music Evermore provides fully funded music tuition and performance opportunities for 11 to 18-year-olds across south Manchester. Partnering with other local organisations like Media Cubs and Brighter Sound, the project nurtures confidence, creativity and professional skills. With over 120 attendees at their youth showcase and BBC Radio features, Music Evermore is transforming access to music for local young people.



Joel Chester Fildes

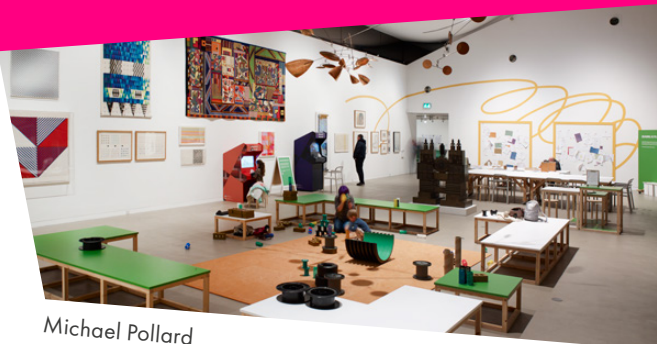
Company Chameleon

Company Chameleon supported over 6,000 young people, 850 emerging artists and 42 professionals through dance training, residencies and performance opportunities. Their inclusive programmes nurtured talent across Manchester, alumni progressing to study at top conservatoires. Through dance, the company's legacy continues to shape confident and creative individuals across generations.

HOME from Home

HOME Creative Engagement

Through deep-rooted partnerships in Hulme, Moss Side and Gorton, HOME delivered creative workshops, performances and exhibitions that reached over 1,100 residents. The programme fostered confidence, wellbeing and artistic expression, supporting communities, women and young people to share their stories, develop new skills, and feel more connected to Manchester's cultural life.



Michael Pollard

Everyday Art School

The Whitworth

This collaborative programme brought together artists, schools and community groups to explore creativity as a tool for connection and care. From Minecraft to textiles, grief to activism, participants of all ages shaped inclusive, co-created projects – challenging barriers and redefining learning through art across Manchester's cultural and civic spaces.





Our Planet: Acting on Climate Change

Force of Nature

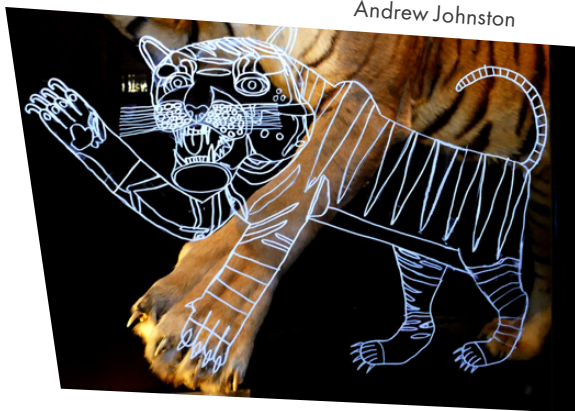
CAN

Force of Nature engaged diverse and working-class communities with climate justice and sustainability themes through creative writing and music. Delivered in libraries and priority areas, the project made environmental issues accessible and inspiring, fostering awareness and action through inclusive, artistic expression.



Shirlaine Forrest

Andrew Johnston



Belonging in Wild

Manchester Museum

This project empowered neurodivergent and D/deaf young adults through co-created art, workshops and film. Collaborating with Venture Arts, Pinc College, and Manchester Deaf Centre, the project inspired inclusive climate action and reflection, reaching over 400,000 visitors and leaving a lasting legacy of representation and environmental awareness.



Olympias Recycled Orchestra

Olympias Music Foundation

Olympias Music Foundation is tackling the issue of musical instruments going to landfill by running a recycled orchestra programme. This accepts donated instruments for repair and distributes them to communities and children in low-income households, giving them free access to instruments in a sustainable way.

The Future is Green

Royal Northern College of Music

This initiative placed climate change and environmental sustainability at the heart of the RNCM's creative and operational activity. The RNCM used its platform to raise awareness, spark discussion and demonstrate meaningful action through a range of performance, outreach and sustainability approaches.

Charlotte Wellings



Excellence in Creative Health and Wellbeing

Afrocats

Afrocats showed a dedication to engaging with marginalised groups in Manchester, focusing on multiple ways of trying to improve their health and wellbeing, being trauma-informed and culturally aware. In 2024/25 they reached over 700 people with dance projects and through collaborations with other cultural venues in Manchester.



So Many Beauties

So Many Beauties celebrates the creativity of people living with dementia. Following 18 months of co-creation with participants and their carers, over 600 people came together at The Bridgewater Hall for an intercultural festival of concerts, workshops and performances, showcasing music's power to connect communities and transform perceptions.



Let's Talk About Chemsex: Portraits of Recovery

Let's Talk About Chemsex was an outstanding year-long arts, health and wellbeing project led by artist Harold Offeh. Through performances, panel discussions, creativity and music production, Manchester's LGBTQ+ community explored intimacy, desire and consent, reducing stigma and opening dialogue around chemsex with bold, affirming visibility on an often taboo subject.



Sing their Name Choir

Dan McDwyer and Adel Owen

The choir was created with the aim of using music and singing to improve wellbeing and bring people with a shared experience together. It provides an innovative and supportive space for people who have experienced bereavement through suicide to come together to sing. This is a completely open access choir, with a repertoire that reflects both loss and hope for the future. The choir brings people together for mutual support, to raise awareness and to create music.

The Best Exhibition

Holly Graham: The Warp/ The Weft/The Wake

Manchester Art Gallery

An expansive and urgent exhibition, sharing Global Threads research, oral history recordings and collections, which centred around a performance costume, conceived by artist Holly Graham. Inspired by African-American abolitionist Sarah Parker Remond, the work draws out legacies of expansionism, colonialism and exploitative labour inherent in the material history of cotton and the wealth that helped fuel Manchester.



Greater Mancunians

The Manchester College

A landmark photography exhibition held at Manchester Central Library, showcasing 120 portraits of influential figures across the city. Created by students from The Manchester College, it celebrated Greater Manchester's cultural diversity and creative talent. The exhibition drew thousands of visitors, received strong public and media praise, and empowered young creatives to pursue industry-standard careers.

Our Town Hall: Portraits of a Workforce

Manchester City Council photographer Barrie Leach captured progress on the Our Town Hall restoration through portraits of those responsible for this momentous project. Held at Central Library, the exhibition of 90 images highlighted trades and crafts that were widespread when the Town Hall was built, but which are now rare, specialist trades.



Michael Pollard

Being Here: Barbara Walker

The Whitworth

Being Here, the first major exhibition by British artist Barbara Walker, presented 60 extraordinary artworks. This powerful exhibition explored Black identity, visibility and belonging, and addressed urgent social issues, including *stop and search* and the *Windrush scandal*. Attracting over 72,000 visitors, it sparked deep emotional responses and inspired reflection, dialogue and lasting impact across generations.

Human Library

Elizabeth Wewiora and residents from north Manchester

A celebration of north Manchester's communities through workshops and a vibrant exhibition, supported by Step Up MCR and One Manchester, this exhibition fostered creativity, intergenerational collaboration, and storytelling across diverse groups. The project inspired personal growth, strengthened local connections, and sparked new opportunities for achieving aspiration. The exhibition demonstrated how art and shared stories can empower individuals and build a more inclusive, connected community.



Jess Robinson

Independent Creative of the Year

Sam Edwards

Sam is an artist, delivering art groups around the city, including Chatty Crafts, a craft group in Beswick that supports mental health; Home from HOME, a women's group of creatives; and Tiny Creative Humans for families at HOME. She also led the community exhibition EXTREME HOPE for Manchester Science Festival. Sam's work fosters creativity, connection, and outstanding collaborative art.



Gaz Cook

Alice Kanako



Balraj Samrai

An advocate for marginalised communities, Balraj's nurturing way of working provides welcoming spaces for collaboration to create art and music through projects with Brighter Sound, Kids of Colour, Olympias Music Foundation and many others. He continues this advocacy work in his role with the Musicians' Union, also raising funds and solidarity for Palestine with the MCR4PAL collective. In addition, Balraj is a co-founder of SEEN, a Manchester-based magazine with a core anti-racist manifesto.

Liam Hopkins

Liam's creative impact across Manchester is exceptional, consistently presenting worldclass art that is bold, inclusive, and deeply rooted in community. Projects range from Piccadilly Gardens the Weave to the reimagining of Manchester Airport's iconic chandeliers. Liam actively involves local people, visiting schools, charities and public spaces to gather ideas and invite collaboration.

One participant in a community workshop said: "It's the first time I've felt part of public art."

Jonathan Oakes



Harriet Hall

Tina Ramos Ekongo

Tina Ramos Ekongo is an Equatorial Guinean–Spanish visual artist, producer and facilitator who has worked with organisations such as Manchester Art Gallery, Afrocats, The Whitworth and HOME. She has produced community-focused projects that are inclusive, anti-racist and collaborative, encouraging wide participation and promoting the benefits of creativity. She supports emerging Black artists with different projects. Tina believes in supporting the community in Manchester and making art accessible to everyone.



The Best Event

Wythenshawe Live Night

Brighter Sound, Music Evermore, Manchester Libraries

A showcase for 30 young performers to an audience of 120 at the sold-out Forum Library Creative Space. Culminating a youth-led music programme by Brighter Sound with local partners, the event highlighted music's power to build confidence, identity and community while laying foundations for a lasting local music offer.



Ghosts at the Old Library

Levenshulme Old Library

A flagship winter event for Levenshulme Old Library, blending live performance, sound and storytelling in an immersive evening of uncanny tales. Commissioned award-winning authors working with local residents and drawing on hyperlocal heritage, lifted community voices into a world-class literary experience for this event.

Manchester Histories Festival

This festival showcased Greater Manchester's diverse histories and heritage through storytelling and creativity. In partnership with the city's world-class universities, it supported their celebrations of 200 years of innovation through talks, exhibitions and public-facing events. Highlights included four world-premiere music commissions and over 4,000 attendees, with people's voices at the very heart of the festival.



WOMEX 24

Manchester Music City

WOMEX celebrated its 30th anniversary in Manchester, bringing together over 2,500 delegates, 738 exhibitors and artists from 56 countries. Showcases filled six city venues alongside films, conferences and the Horizons stage, spotlighting UK and Irish talent. There were also standout performances from Manchester artists representing the city's rich, diverse and globally connected music scene.





A celebration of African and Caribbean heritage through the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness. The festival featured a short opera on The Bridgewater Hall's main stage and a vibrant weekend of performances, discussions and exhibitions, which highlighted Black classical composers and challenged perceptions of both homelessness and opera.



The Cultural Welcome Award



Afrocats

An empowering organisation, delivering activity focused on inclusivity, belonging and cultural celebration for Manchester's most marginalised communities, particularly refugees, asylum seekers and migrant families. Every project focuses on warmth, welcome, and emotional safety. Whether providing dance and movement classes, community meals or digital literacy training, Afrocats provide spaces for people to be heard. Their trauma-informed programming goes beyond creative arts; it's about recognising people's humanity, offering healing, and restoring dignity.



Murry Lee



REELMCR

Working across Manchester and Greater Manchester for 25 years, many intergenerational and diverse communities have participated to produce high-quality films and dramas, including working-class communities and adults with complex additional needs. One Blackley Drama Group participant said: "My life has changed. It has given me so many things to look forward to. REELMCR has made me see I can do things well, be proud of my community, and be creative."



Reform Radio

One of Manchester's most welcoming cultural spaces, opening doors for young people often excluded from the creative industries. Providing free courses in podcasting, radio, DJing and music production, alongside an exceptional wellbeing programme, Reform Radio's approach embraces Manchester's diversity, welcoming people from all backgrounds. Participants describe Reform Radio as 'refreshing', 'a home', and 'somewhere I can be myself'.

Manchester Jewish Museum

Founded in Cheetham Hill, one of the UK's most diverse neighbourhoods, the museum offers a consistently outstanding welcome to everyone. Audience feedback highlights how the museum creates an atmosphere that makes people feel relaxed, at ease and genuinely welcome. When asked about the best part, visitors say it's 'the welcome', 'meeting the Jewish people running the museum' and 'talking with the wonderful volunteers'.



Ticket Prices	
Adult	£10.00
Child (10-16)	£5.00
Family (2 Adults + 2 Children)	£35.00
Senior (65+)	£8.00
Student (with ID)	£5.00
Volunteer	£5.00
Concession (disabled, over 60, etc.)	£5.00
Free	£0.00
Total: 36	

The Whitworth

The Whitworth, the north west's first Gallery of Sanctuary, has a whole-gallery approach to inclusive welcome. With partners Venture Arts, Portraits of Recovery, and Afrocats, as well as local communities, co-creating programming, interpretation and multilingual materials ensures visitors, artists and volunteers feel respected and included. It's not just a friendly gallery, it's a long-term change, where care and community are felt.



Z-arts

Dedicating a quarter of a century to creating a welcoming space where children, families, artists and neighbours unite to connect, create and celebrate culture in all its forms. The team is consistently praised for its warm welcome that makes visitors from all generations feel like they belong. One visitor commented: "It isn't just a venue – it's a much-loved part of the community, showing what can happen when creativity and care come together."

Ray Chan



A NEW SANTA FROM THE ZIPPY FAMILY!



Manchester's favourite festive tradition continues as a brand-new member of the Zippy family arrives, brought to you by **Blachere Illumination UK**.

This cheerful newcomer carries on Zippy's legacy of spreading festive joy across the city, bringing a fresh sparkle to Manchester's famous Christmas markets.

Behind the magic once again? Blachere Illumination UK! Proudly lighting up Manchester and making it the ultimate Christmas destination!



SEE HOW WE LIGHT UP TOWNS, CITIES, AND BRANDS ACROSS THE UK, ALL YEAR ROUND.

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