

highlights
rural touring scheme

Annual Report
2025-2026

Highlights is supported by:

Northumberland County Council

Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Westmorland & Furness Council

ORGANISATIONAL STATEMENT

VISION

Highlights will present vibrant, entertaining and thought-provoking cultural activities to enrich the lives of people in rural communities across the north of England.

MISSION

Highlights connects artists and audiences through inspirational and entertaining shared cultural experiences. To achieve this we will

Engage with a diverse range of artists, companies and creative practitioners.

Support a network of grassroots volunteers to programme varied creative events in village halls and community spaces in Cumbria, County Durham and Northumberland and help them provide great social occasions.

Prioritise communities who have limited access to professional cultural work.

Expand the network, giving greater access to the work and increasing the profile of rural touring across the north of England.

Work with schools and community groups to deliver events and participatory activities.

VALUES

Highlights aims to be fair minded, kind, open, collaborative and inclusive. To achieve this we will

Nurture and support our staff, artists, promoters, volunteers and audiences.

Be responsive, with a 'can do' but pragmatic approach to our work.

Consider the environmental impact of all our activities.



GRIMM, Evengeline Henderson

HEADLINES

The financial year of 2025/2026 has seen Highlights continue to work in partnership with rural communities across Cumbria, County Durham and Northumberland. We have worked hard to deliver events across the region, collaborating with venues to celebrate the local and affordable nature of arts events on people's doorstep.

2025/2026 was the third year of a three-year National Portfolio agreement with Arts Council of England (ACE), which has now been extended by two years until March 2028. The NPO agreement is awarded to Highlights and Arts Out West consortium, with Highlights as the lead partner. Local authority funding from Westmorland & Furness and Northumberland remained at a standstill amount. As per 2024/2025, we received no funding from County Durham.

LIVE EVENTS
We work with a network of volunteer promoters to programme live events into rural communities, bringing quality cultural opportunities to remote areas.

PARTICIPATE
We offer affordable creative workshops to schools and community groups, inspiring the next generation of performers and audiences.

ARTIST DEVELOPMENT
We work with a broad range of artists, companies and creative practitioners, supporting the development of regional, national and international talent into the sector.



Medusa

2025-2026



Duane Forrest

We delivered events in 80 rural communities.

We delivered 133 performances across 56 venues, working with 43 companies and resulting in audience numbers of 5861, of which 126 were children and young people.

We delivered 28 Creative Highlights arts and crafts workshops in 20 venues. We worked with seven regional artists and had 271 participants.

We delivered two performances in two Northumberland libraries, working with two companies and resulting in audience numbers of 58.

Box office for the 25/26 financial year of £78,842, of which 63.5% was via online sales.

Across the two seasons, £17,975 was returned to Highlights, meaning venues retained £ 2,955.

The value of volunteer contributions equates to approx. £46,095. This is calculated at an estimated 629 volunteers giving a total of 3073 hours @ £15 per hour (an accepted, if modest, 'skilled volunteer' hourly rate).

We worked with 28 schools and two community groups through our Participate programme; delivering 56 events from 17 artists/companies to 1750 participants.

We delivered four in person and one online promoter training sessions in May 2025 and three online promoter training sessions in October 2025.

We launched a new website in summer 2025. This coincided with our tickets going on sale for the Autumn 2025 season and an increase in the standard price. To support venues with this increase, we introduced a very successful two-week Early Bird ticket offer, which we have committed to continue each season.

We continued our work as a partner in the Rural Touring Dance Initiative, joining The Place, NRTF, Take Art and Sonia Sabri Company in leading the current round of this national programme, funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Arts Council England.

We continued our artist development work alongside regional partners such as Northern Consortium of Rural Touring Schemes, Venues North as well as international partners such as Atlantic Presenters Association, Canadian Folk Music Awards and Music PEI.

We began a new collaboration with Sound Roots, North East Arts Touring and Riddu Riđđu Festival.

Highlights continued work on our Investors in the Environment accreditation, receiving the Silver Award in summer 2025.



Dancers from Kizlar, Ceyda Tanc Dance, at Vindolanda, Northumberland
Photo by Kit Haigh

PERFORMANCE PROGRAMME

2025 - 2026 showcased as broad a range of performances as ever, with theatre, music, storytelling, family work and dance on the programme.

Theatre across the year included Documental Productions' *Scaffolding*, selected after seeing it at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival; *The Bench* from north-east based producer Carole W Productions; 6 Foot Stories' *The Deadcoats*; Theatre by the Lake's *Steel* and Evie Henderson's *Grimm* – a six hander about the cod wars in Grimsby, which came via Pitch Up Rural, digital showcase event – and Sam Freeman's *We're Not Getting a Dog*.

Highlights coordinated a 20-date UK tour for Toronto-based artist Duane Forrest and his show *Bob Marley: How Reggae Changed the World*. Kate Lynch met Duane at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in summer 2024, and his performances were a huge success, opening the Autumn 2025 season. Other Canadian artists this year included *Basset*, *Catherine MacLellan & Lucy Farrell*, string quartet *Medusa* and Sarah Hagen with her performance *Wonder Women!*

We programmed two productions through the Rural Touring Dance Initiative: Altered Skin's *Fatherhood* performed by Shane Shambu and female-led company Ceyda Tanc Dance with *Kizlar*. We also programmed *The Mountain Witch* by RTDI alumni, Speedwell Dance.

We spent much of the early part of 2025 considering our ticketing model. For our Autumn 2025 we increased our standard ticket price, alongside a two-week early bird ticketing initiative. This was a real success, with 650+ tickets sold in the early bird period, and we have repeated this in subsequent seasons.



Ma Bessie

"Please don't miss these fine artists, we were lucky enough to have them at our hall last night and the audience were blown away by their mastery of their craft, we were engaged and immersed into their world from the moment they set foot in the building, a better performance we have not seen in ten years of Highlights. Truly amazing, entertaining, emotional and evocative of a bygone age."
Audience member about Sons of Town Hall, Wingates Village Institute

"Absolutely brilliant, all four of us were laughing silly. Highlights events are so important."
Audience member at Victor & Albert at Allendale Village Hall, Northumberland

"Wow - what a production. Inspiring and informative, delighted to meet the actors, please come again."
Audience member at Wild at Arnside Educational Institute, Cumbria, programmed via Create Tour Connect



Wild, Black Country Touring



CREATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

Creative Highlights is a series of arts and crafts workshops delivered by regional artists in village halls and community spaces.

During the year we worked with eight regional artists: *Joan Aitchison* of *JA Watercolours* (Cumbria), *Julie Evans Printmaker* (Lancashire), *Rachel Hope* of *Learn to Draw Portraits* (Northumberland), nature artist *Steve Pardue* (Northumberland), *Claire Priestley* of *Teesdale Felt* (County Durham), *Emma Scott* of *Adeline & Twine* (County Durham), *Karen Varley* of *Glass by Donemark* (County Durham). We offered workshops in watercolours, Provincetown white line printing, pencil portraits, felting, macramé, fused glass and nature journalling. The workshops were all half-day and provided a valuable social occasion as well as a chance to learn a new skill, and we attract a different audience to our performances, extending our reach.

We paused the programme in Spring 2026 to allow for a full review of its success and how best to take it forward. The programme returns for a standalone season, October 2026 to March 2027.

"Good venue, I really enjoyed it. Joan is a fantastic teacher and I learned lots. I came on my own but was made to feel very welcome."
Participant at Let's Enjoy Watercolour with Joan Aitchison, Soulby Village Hall

"I really enjoyed the workshop. Everything was very clearly explained, and the pace felt just right for a beginner like me. The teacher was patient, kind and very encouraging and positive. I was amazed at what beautiful images we all produced in such a short time. Thank you."
Participant at Carve, Paint & Print - Provincetown Whiteline with Julie Evans, Arnside Educational Institute

PARTICIPATE

Our work with schools and community groups has continued in 2025-2026. We have an impressive portfolio of artists and practitioners, and we work with artists from our performance menu as well as with regional artists specifically to deliver this work.

Across 2025/2026, we worked with schools and artists to host workshops and performances in dance, theatre, animation, writing, circus skills, storytelling, music and street dance.

We hosted a series of performances of Jam Jar Theatre's *Penguins* in schools and community venues in early December. Presented in a giant inflatable igloo, the performance mixed humour, movement and storytelling and offered a warm and memorable way to explore ideas about friendship and the natural world. At Stannington First School, staff spoke about the preparation pack they received in advance, which helped them build the performance into their "Brr, it's cold!" topic and their Eco Schools work. For many of their youngest pupils, *Penguins* was their first taste of immersive live theatre; learning when to join in, when to listen, and how a story can unfold on stage.

"The children's faces were a picture, all so engaged! We loved the interactive elements; the dressing up, the snowball fight, the colouring in! What a magical way for our children to start December."
Teacher feedback

"We have never had such a favourable response to anyone coming into school before. The children absolutely loved The Quest for Planet Q but it wasn't just them, all the staff said how fantastic it was too. Amazing and uplifting were the most used words to describe the performance."
Broomley First School, Northumberland, about Knotted Hawk's performance and workshop

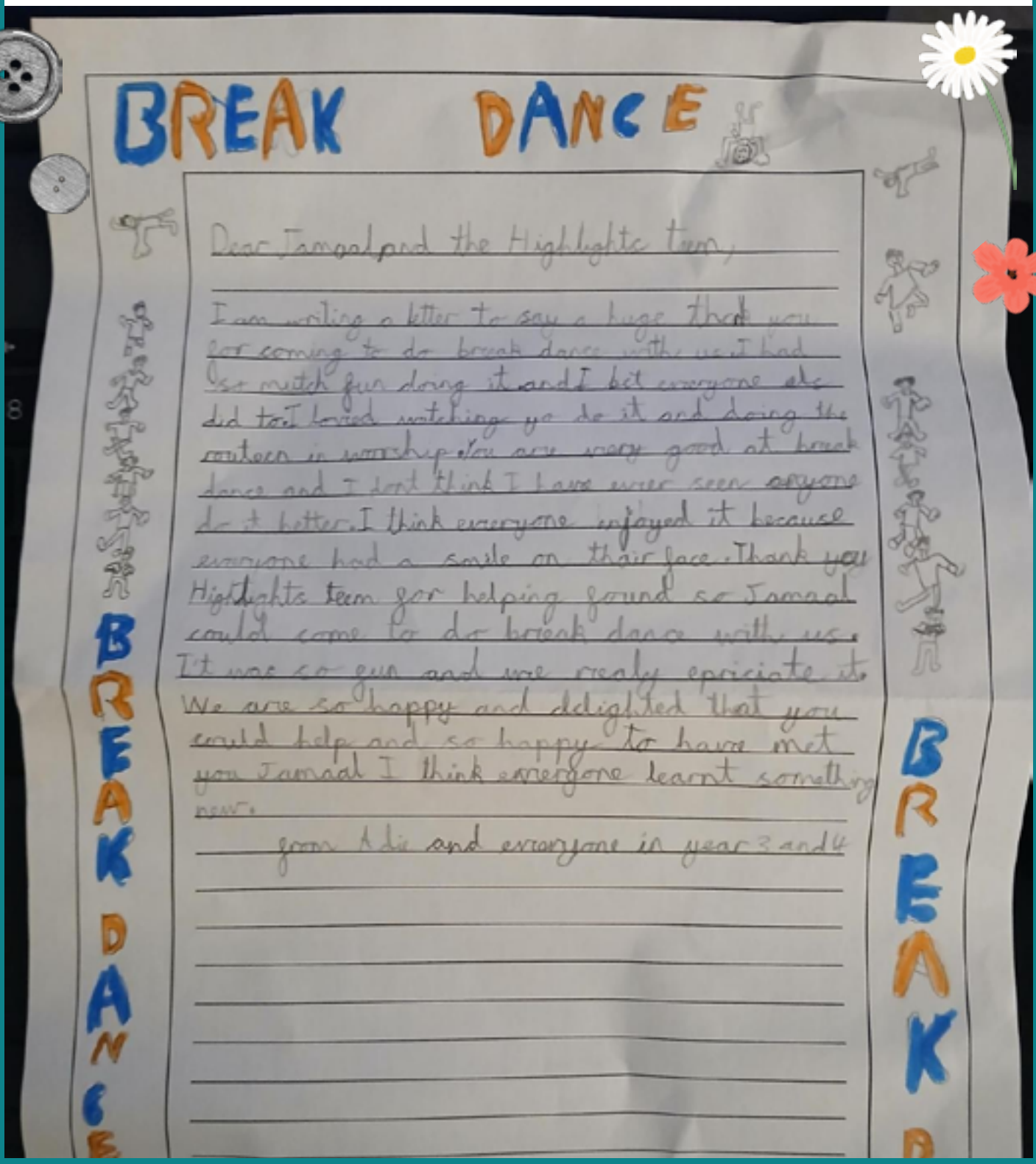


Ella Jarman-Pinto at Brough Primary School

CASE STUDY: O'DRISCOLL COLLECTIVE

In March 2026, street dancer Jamaal O'Driscoll of O'Driscoll Collective spent a week in the north of England delivering workshops in six schools as part of the Rural Touring Dance Initiative.

Jamaal created a video of his time with Highlights, which can be viewed here: https://youtu.be/S4D7ybcqMPs?si=Cvy88cHorraU0VSo



Feedback letter about Jamaal O'Driscoll's workshop

ARTIST DEVELOPMENT

Rural Touring Dance Initiative

Rural Touring Dance Initiative (RTDI) is a national project which supports dance artists and rural promoters to make great dance performance events happen in rural spaces.

Highlights is proud to be one of five cultural partners who collectively make up RTDI. In July 2022 the current partners (The Place, Highlights, National Rural Touring Forum, Sonia Sabri Company and Take Art) were awarded £400,000 from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and £450,000 from Arts Council England for 2023 – 2026. As well as supporting up to 10 new Associate Venues to programme dance in rural areas and market towns, the funding enables RTDI to support eight dance artists and companies per year to tour their work to rural areas, delivering over 200 performances and 90 workshops between autumn 2023 and summer 2026.

Since January 2023 Highlights has hosted one of the three regional RTDI Coordinators, Susan Coffer, who helps to deliver more high-quality dance to the network of village halls and market town venues in the north of England and Scotland, from Aberdeenshire to Cheshire.

Sound Roots

Sound Roots is the Arts Council of England's leading organisation for providing career pathways into the folk, roots and acoustic music commercial industries. It builds audiences, advises on policy, supports talent from diverse backgrounds, and creates pathways to a more diverse workforce.

Highlights has been working as an industry mentor on their Artist Mentoring Pathway since Spring 2025, supporting rural touring performances for the artists. *Ed Blunt, Filkin's Drift, Lucy Grubb* and *Anna McLuckie* performed three shows each in a double bill as part of our Autumn 2025 season.

"My shows with Highlights Rural Touring in the Lake District were a lovely and meaningful experience. It was a great opportunity to play to completely new audiences in beautiful settings, and to feel the close connection that comes with smaller, community-driven shows.

We were really well looked after at every venue, and the audiences were attentive and generous. There's a real appetite for live music in these areas. As an artist in the early stages of my career, these shows gave me the chance to hone my stagecraft, build my audience, and learn more about the nuts and bolts of touring independently."
Ed Blunt, artist on the Artist Mentoring Pathway 2025/2026

"The programme continues to support and empower talented folk musicians ready to harness the power of experience and peer support provided throughout the year. With thanks to our funders, our industry mentors, Focus Wales, FolkEast, Your Roots Are Showing and Highlights Rural Touring, we are confident of extraordinary outcomes for our selected artists."
David Agnew, Chief Executive and Artistic Director of Sound Roots

Canada

Highlights continues to programme work from Canadian artists, thanks to a longstanding relationship with Atlantic Presenters Association and newer relationships with Music PEI and Canada Folk Music Awards. During 2025/2026 Highlights coordinated national tours for *Duane Forrest* and *Sarah Hagen*, and programmed dates for *Basset*, *Catherine Maclellan* and *Medusa*.

Riddu Riđđu Festival

In summer 2025, Kate Lynch was invited to join the delegate programme at Riddu Riđđu Festival, an annual indigenous festival in the Norwegian part of Sápmi (Sámi indigenous territory). Riddu Riđđu means 'little storm by the coast' and the festival was first held in 1991, organised by Sámi youth with the objective of reclaiming their identity. It is now Europe's largest indigenous festival and a celebration of Sámi culture, welcoming visitors from across the world.

Inspired by the landscape, the community and the cultural threads we share as northerners in our respective countries, Highlights has now applied for funding to support a cross-border cultural exchange project with partners Riddu Riđđu Festival and North East Arts Touring (Scotland).



Sound Roots artists Filkin's Drift and Lucy Grubb

CASE STUDY: SWALLOW'S WING PUPPETRY

In March 2026, Carolene Yawa Ada of Swallow's Wing Puppetry, toured with Highlights for a week, taking workshops into schools and performing *Anansi and the Lost Sun* at two village hall venues.

"I wanted to say how enriching and eye-opening it was to tour with your organisation. I'm absolutely thrilled by the experience and feel I've gained so much from it.

As an artist of colour, visiting proper rural areas is still quite new for me, and I'll admit I carried a certain level of apprehension—especially after the "flag-themed summer" we've had. But the experience became a real education, and I'm grateful for that. It was also striking (and quite beautiful) to see children playing on natural grass and getting muddy—something that feels increasingly rare in London, where so many spaces are covered in astroturf.

Thank you both for your trust, for the bookings, and for the care and thoughtful planning you put into the tour. I've come away with a whole new perspective on rural touring, and that's entirely thanks to you."
Carolene Yawa Ada, Swallow's Wing Puppetry



Swallow's Wing Puppetry at Greystoke Primary School

CASE STUDY: CEYDA TANC DANCE

In September 2025, Highlights hosted a residency, supported by the Rural Touring Dance Initiative, for Ceyda Tanc Dance. This was to support the adaptation of their piece of work, *Kizlar*, for rural touring. The residency took place at The Threshing Barn, Gilsland and was hosted by Amanda Drago and Kit Haigh of Green Croft Arts. The week included a trip to Vindolanda, on Hadrian's Wall, and a sharing of the work to invited guests. In March 2026, the company returned to Gilsland for a sold-out performance of *Kizlar* at the village hall.

Alongside the residency, we appointed Zoe Gadd of Dance Ahead to bring together a multi-generational group of women from across rural Cumbria to co-create and perform a curtain-raiser in advance of the performance of Kizlar at Gilsland Village Hall. Naming themselves Mezze, over a 3-month period, the group went to Melrose to see Ceyda Tanc Dance perform and worked together to create *Tracing Backtalk*. Participants reported exceptionally strong outcomes in connection, confidence and wellbeing, with 100% noting increased social connection and positive impact. The project successfully combined community participation with professional performance, generating strong feelings of belonging, achievement and future creative engagement.

"These opportunities are absolutely critical. Connection and inclusion needs to be our bedrock."
"Built confidence, allowed me to learn things I never knew I could do."
"My self worth and belief has started to return."
"Joyful, fulfilling, memorable."
"The space felt like a safety net – we all truly belonged."
Participant feedback



Participants rehearsing for curtain-raiser, Tracing Backtalk

VENUES AND PROMOTERS



We have continued our work with promoters, offering regular in person and online training opportunities and supporting them with marketing and promotion of their events.

We have had some very successful in person season launch events, with venues enjoying networking opportunities. We continue to offer online events as an option for those who find this more convenient.

We welcomed two new venues to the network this year: Bardsea Malt Kiln Village Hall in Cumbria (Westmorland & Furness) and Humshaugh Village Hall in Northumberland.

"This is a fabulous venue, very much part of its village community. We don't live in Barningham but make a point of coming to the Highlights productions; the venue's selection of theatre, music and the spoken word is eclectic, thought provoking and, without fail, 'stays with us' long after the evening."
Audience member, Barningham Village Hall



Barningham Village Hall, County Durham

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Highlights acknowledges that our work has an effect on the environment and has identified key aspects that could contribute to our carbon footprint and other negative impacts.

Rural touring has significantly better green credentials than its town or city equivalent. A study by Take Art and the National Rural Touring Forum found that rural performances produce 57% less carbon emissions per audience member than city equivalents, with distances travelled being much lower as well as the emissions produced by the venues. To support our aspirations we are partnered with Eden Rivers Trust and have committed to volunteer at their tree nursery at least twice a year. We have been members of Investors in the Environment and, in the year 2025-2026, received the Silver Award for our commitment to improving our green credentials.

Partnering with small-scale multi-purpose community spaces, we bring art closer to the doorstep of audiences and we continue to programme work with environmental themes across all areas of delivery.



Penguins at Crosby Ravensworth School

ORGANISATIONAL UPDATE

GOVERNANCE

The Board of Trustees started the year with seven members and ended the year with seven members. Edwina Lugg resigned in September 2025 and Judy Galloway resigned in December 2025.

Berony Abraham and Lorna Amor became trustees at the AGM in September 2025.

During the year, the trustees undertook a skills analysis to ensure the board collectively had both the breadth and depth of necessary skills and experience.

ACCOUNTANTS

Jane Ascroft from Barnard Castle remains our accountant and Independent Auditor.

TRAINING

Individual trustees attended training on Understanding Trustee Responsibilities and Good Governance.

STAFF

Linnhe Harrison, Communications Officer, left Highlights in November after 3.5 years working on our communications and branding. We made the decision not to appoint to a similar post, and we are using a mix of freelance support and internal capacity to cover the work.

STAFF TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

NRTF Conference (Kate Lynch, Susan Coffer)

Manchester Folk Festival (Kate Lynch)

GDPR Responsibilities for Charities – Refresher (Jo Cottrell)

Cumbria Devolution Consultation and Impact with W & F Council (Jo Cottrell, Kate Lynch)

HMRC – Understanding Statutory Leave for Employees (Jo Cottrell)

Graphic Design Level 1, Kendal College (Dawn Foster)



COLLABORATORS

During 2025-2026, Highlights has maintained many partnerships and introduced new collaborations. Partnerships include:

Arts Out West

National Rural Touring Forum

Rural Touring Dance Initiative
- The Place, Take Art, NRTF, Sonia Sabri Company

Northern Consortium of Rural Touring Schemes

Northumberland Library Services

Atlantic Presenters Association

Music PEI

Canada Folk Music

Sound Roots UK

Royal Northern Sinfonia

COMPANY DETAILS

Registered Office: Market Cross Cabin, New Road, Brough CA17 4AS

Phone number: 01768 353954

Registered charity no. 1100920

Company Limited by Guarantee no. 4646007

LIST OF VENUES

CUMBRIA:

Alston Town Hall; Appleby Hub/Appleby Public Hall; Armathwaite Old School Hall; Arnside Educational Institute; Askham & Helton Community Centre; Bardsea Malt Kiln Village Hall; Casterton Village Hall; Crosby Ravensworth Village Hall; Dufton Village Hall; Gleaston Village Hall; Grasmere Village Hall; Brigsteer Village Hall; Ireleth Temperance Hall; Kentmere Village Institute; Lazonby Village Hall; Levens Village Hall; Melmerby Village Hall; Murton Village Institute; Orton Market Hall; Penruddock Village Hall; Rampside Village Hall; Skirwith Village Hall; Soulby Village Hall; Stainton Village Hall; The Club, Kirkby Stephen; The Stage at St Mary's Church, Kirkby Stephen; The Community Hall, Grizebeck.

COUNTY DURHAM:

Barningham Village Hall; Boldron Village Hall; Bowes & Gilmonby Parish Hall; Cotherstone Village Hall; Edmundbyers Village Hall; Frosterley Village Hall; Hamsterley Village Hall; Mickleton Village Hall; Scarth Memorial Hall, Staindrop; St Thomas Church Hall, Stanhope; UTASS, Middleton in Teesdale.

NORTHUMBERLAND:

Allendale Village Hall; Amble Parish Hall; Bardon Mill & Henshaw Village Hall; Berwick Library; Ellingham Village Hall; Felton Village Hall; Gilsland Village Hall; Great Whittington Village Hall; Hepscott Parish Hall; Howick Village Hall; Humshaugh Village Hall; Lesbury Village Hall; Middleton & Todridge Village Hall; Newbrough Town Hall; St Cuthbert's Church, Norham; The Cheviot Centre, Wooler; The Hearth Arts Centre, Horsley; Wark Town Hall & Mechanics Institute; Whittingham Memorial Institute; Wingates Village Institute.

LIST OF ARTISTS

PERFORMANCE ARTISTS

6 Foot Stories
Altered Skin
Basset
Black Country Touring
Jessie Binns
Ed Blunt
Carole W Productions
Katy Cawkwell & Lucy Lill
Ceyda Tanc Dance
Rioghnach Connolly
Counter's Creek
Documental Productions
Filkin's Drift
Firelight Trio
Duane Forrest
Sam Freeman
Graffiti Classics
Lucy Grubb
Sarah Hagen
Evie Henderson
Jali Bakary Konteh & Sarah Deere-Jones
Lila Dance
Helen Longworth & Peter Rylands
Russell Lucas
Ma Bessie Productions
Medusa
Catherine MacLellan & Lucy Farrell
Anna McLuckie
Sarah McQuaid
Patrick Monahan
Multi Story Theatre Co.
Northumberland Theatre Company
Old Baby Mackerel
PMac Productions & Bigupnorth
Ragged Edge Productions
Bernadette Russell
Sons of Town Hall
Speedwell Dance
Swallow's Wing Puppetry
Tatie Pot Collective
Theatre by the Lake
Touki
Victor & Albert
Hattie Whitehead

VISUAL ARTISTS

Adeline & Twine
Glass by Donemark
JA Watercolours
Julie Evans Printmaker
Steve Pardue Art
Rachel Hope
Teesdale Felt

PARTICIPATE ARTISTS

Carole W Productions
Dave Camlin
Gav Cross
Let's Circus
Eliot Smith Dance
Georgia Hill
Jam Jar Theatre
Ella Jarman-Pinto
Life & Limb
Lila Dance
Rowan McCabe
Knotted Hawk
Jamaal O'Driscoll
Kema Sikazwe
Hannah Sowerby
Swallow's Wing Puppetry
Robin Webb.

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