ASSOCIATION for CULTURAL ENTERPRISES

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

EMBEDDING COMMERCIAL THINKING IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR

COMMERCIAL PERFORMANCE BAROMETER REPORT 2026

Contents

Report: Jon Young, Audience Research Director, Decision House
Executive Summary: Tom Dawson, Interim COO, Association for Cultural Enterprises
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Cover image: Roman Baths

This report highlights the increasing importance of commercial capability as a core part of organisational resilience. What is particularly encouraging is the evidence that cultural organisations are not only adapting to challenging conditions, but are doing so in ways that remain true to their purpose and values.

The organisations that are succeeding are those that are embracing a more integrated approach, where programming, audience engagement and commercial thinking are aligned. This is not about compromise - it's about innovative solutions to strengthen the long term sustainability of the sector.

Melanie Lewis MBE, Chair,
Association for Cultural Enterprises

The Commercial Performance Barometer is helping us move the conversation from anecdote to evidence. What we are seeing clearly is that commercial success is no longer driven by single levers, but by how organisations bring together programming, experience and enterprise.

The most successful organisations are those that are agile, outward-looking and willing to test and learn. They are using data to inform decisions, respond to changing audience behaviours, and ensure that commercial thinking has a seat at the leadership table. Cultural enterprise is not a bolt-on but a key part of delivering an organisation's mission. This report provides both a snapshot of where the sector is now and a practical guide to where it can go next.

Paul Griffiths, Chief Executive,
Association for Cultural Enterprises

Association for Cultural Enterprises

The Association for Cultural Enterprises is the only charity and trade body for the cultural sector that brings together education, experience and best practice in cultural income generation. We are dedicated to providing tangible support to help arts, cultural and heritage organisations maximise their existing income streams and identify new ones.

Our aim is to champion the essential role commercial activities play in sustaining cultural organisations. We promote commercial best practice within the sector by providing education, training and networking opportunities and facilitating the sharing of knowledge and experience between our members.

Our members represent over 1,650 sites across the UK and beyond, including museums and galleries, national parks and zoos, historic houses and monuments, performing arts, libraries and places of worship.

The Association for Cultural Enterprises is proud to be an Arts Council England Investment Principles Support Organisation (IPSO).

Decision House

Decision House is a specialist research consultancy working solely within the cultural and tourism sectors. Its work focusses on identifying market trends and helping cultural venues understand how they can grow and develop their existing and potential audiences. Its main expertise lies in trends analysis, visitor research, formative and summative evaluations, audience segmentations and market understanding.

Decision House is extremely proud to work on the Commercial Performance Barometer, and is grateful to the contribution of participants for making it such a strong source of sector insights.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commercial activity now makes up the largest proportion of income for cultural venues in the UK, averaging 40%, ahead of fundraising, grants, and ticketing.*

With the cultural sector under perpetual funding pressure, inflationary cost increases, and demanding audiences, this timely report looks at findings from the Association's Commercial Performance Barometer, and seeks to provide trends and recommendations for how organisations can ensure their commercial activity grows and thrives.

Our main call to action for the sector is:

A Seat at the Table

This report argues that those organisations who integrate commerciality into their strategic decision making are the most successful at generating income.

Venues where commercial teams influence programming and strategy outperform those where they do not. For the sector to thrive, commercial leadership must move from purely operational to strategic partner.

Income generation requires a seat at senior leadership, including a voice at Board level.

Being entrepreneurial is no longer optional for cultural organisations, it is a necessity to not only thrive, but to survive.

*Cultural Enterprises Benchmarking Report 2024

Strategic priorities for 2026-27

The evidence points to a clear strategic shift, where commercial performance must be designed, not assumed. Five priorities that should shape sector strategy in 2026:

1. Put commercially-driven programming at the core
Programming decisions must explicitly consider revenue, dwell time and spend, not just audience or curatorial outcomes. This is the single biggest determinant of success. The mission always come first, but a sustainable business model allows the mission to flourish not flounder.

2. **Own seasonal moments - and create demand, don't just respond to it**
Seasonal peaks now dominate performance. Organisations must maximise key moments (Christmas, summer, Easter) while creating new reasons to visit across the year, particularly in off-peak periods.

3. Build resilience against external shocks
Weather volatility, economic pressure and international shifts are now structural realities. Leading organisations will de-risk demand through advance booking, flexible offers, and more adaptable on-site experiences.

4. Broaden audiences and diversify income
Growth will increasingly come from:

- Local and repeat audiences
- New audience segments
- Premium and experiential offers
- Stronger retail and catering propositions tailored to changing behaviour.

5. Give commercial teams a seat at the table
The evidence is unequivocal: venues where commercial teams influence programming and strategy outperform those where they do not. For the sector to thrive, commercial leadership must move from purely operational to strategic partner.

The Commercial Performance Barometer reveals a cultural sector that proved resilient but increasingly uneven in 2025, with performance shaped by how effectively organisations align programming, audience insight and commercial strategy.

Admissions ended the year broadly flat (-0.3%). However, this masks a far more challenging reality: 40% of venues experienced significant decline, with London particularly affected (-5.4%).

The underlying picture is clear: footfall alone is no longer a reliable proxy for commercial success. Secondary spend remains fragile, especially against inflation, with catering proving more resilient (+4% spend per visitor) than retail (+1%), reflecting a more cautious, value-driven visitor.

At the same time, external pressures like extreme weather, cost-of-living constraints, and international instability, have moved from background conditions to strategic risks requiring active mitigation.

Yet within this context, many organisations outperformed. The strongest results came from those that were commercially intentional, audience-led and operationally agile.

Three defining insights emerge:

1. **Performance is uneven**
Some organisations had strong years, but many struggled. The sites that did well made deliberate choices around programming, partnerships and how they responded to their audiences. Do we risk a two-tier sector in the future where those that think and act entrepreneurially and can invest in technology, leave the rest of the sector behind?

2. Programming is the primary commercial lever
Across the sector, programming has proven to be the single biggest driver of admissions, dwell time and spend. Where programming aligns with audience mindset and commercial objectives, it unlocks disproportionate impact. Where it does not, performance suffers.

3. The visitor is more selective and experience-driven
Consumers are increasingly risk-averse, concentrating spend around key seasonal moments and trusted experiences.

What's working:

The Barometer identifies a consistent model for success:

- Commercially-led programming that drives both footfall and spend
- Seasonal and mindset-driven experiences that capture demand at key moments
- Partnerships that extend reach and relevance
- Premium offers that unlock higher-value audiences
- Innovation and responsiveness in uncertain conditions
- A genuinely commercial organisational mindset.

Critically, the most successful organisations are those where commercial thinking is embedded in strategic decision-making, not bolted on afterwards.

The strategic implication:

In an environment defined by volatility and selective consumer behaviour, success will depend on how organisations programme, position and price their offer, and whether commercial expertise is embedded at the heart of those decisions.

For policymakers and funders, this has clear implications:

- Supporting organisations to build commercial capability is now critical
- Encouraging cross-department decision-making will drive stronger outcomes.

Those that programme commercially, act strategically, and lead collaboratively will be the most successful in the years to come.

INTRODUCING THE COMMERCIAL PERFORMANCE BAROMETER

In January 2025, the **Association for Cultural Enterprises** launched the Commercial Performance Barometer – a monthly member survey run by its insight partners, **Decision House**. The Barometer aims to provide members with:

- Regular updates on key commercial areas such as admissions, catering and retail published via blogs, webinars and a member dashboard
- Deep dives into other commercial areas and events or topical issues such as US tariffs
- Examples of outstanding best practice from across the sector.

Since launching the survey, more than 260 venues have taken part with representation from cultural organisations of all types and sizes from across the UK and Ireland, including:

So far we have communicated findings in two dashboards, four webinars, twelve blogs, and one panel discussion at our annual conference. As we head into 2026, we have consulted with members and introduced new questions on ecommerce, and developed the dashboard to include new filters and functionality.

This report seeks to summarise the key outcomes from the first year of the Barometer, and recommend actions for cultural venues to become more financially sustainable. Across four sections it will communicate:

- The overall performance of the cultural sector including admissions, retail, catering, venue hire and events
- The main challenges we face: how factors such as extreme weather, cost-of-living and US political developments have hindered the sector this year
- The drivers of positive performance: six key themes that defined high performing organisations in 2025
- Focus areas for 2026: A summary of key priorities based on what we've learned so far.

This report is designed to support organisations with their decision-making, and above all with their commercial performance in 2026 and beyond. As ever, any comments or feedback will be gratefully received.

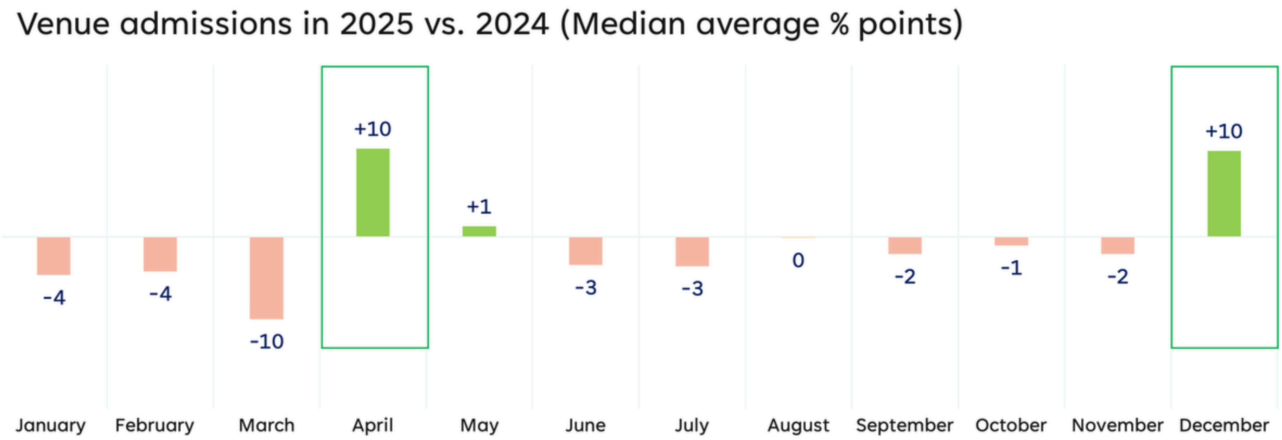
THANK YOU

The Association would like to extend its heartfelt thanks to all the organisations and sites which take the time every month to complete the survey. Without your input, the unique insights presented in this report would not be possible. We strongly believe we are at our best as a sector when we are working together collaboratively. Thank you.

KEY MEASURES OF COMMERCIAL PERFORMANCE

Admissions

For most months in 2025, cultural venue admissions were down on 2024, with key exceptions in April, May, August and December.



At +10%, footfall in December stands out the most (April's +10% due to a late Easter), particularly after a below average autumn. For many Cultural Enterprises members, December 2025 was their most successful end of year in some time, one large member organisation stating:

> December was an exceptional trading period and our best ever Christmas for visitors, F&B and retail.

Strong footfall in key months means that Cultural Enterprises members ended the year with admissions only slightly down on 2024 overall, at -0.3%. A benign annual average, however, conceals a very challenging year for many. 40% of venues reported admissions more than 3% down on 2024, and there were varying fortunes by region, venue size and type. London, for example, experienced an average fall of -5%, and the South East of England a drop of -2%. Wales and the South West ended the year only a little down on 2024, but for two large iconic venues in this part of the UK, admissions were -7% down, a drop of nearly 100,000 visitors each.

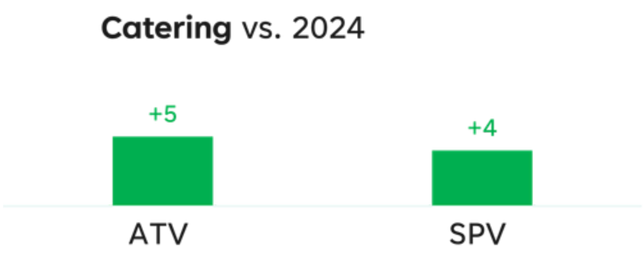
Annual admissions compared to 2024

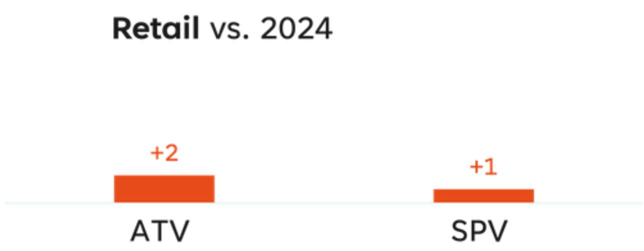
Area	Percentage Change	Number of Venues
All	-0.3%	149
Net: England	-1.3%	61
London	-5.4%	16
South East	-2.2%	9
South West	-0.3%	14
Midlands & East of England	-2.4%	14
North of England	+1.3%	13
Wales	-0.2%	5*
Scotland	-0.1%	78
Northern Ireland	+4.3%	3*

*Note small base sizes in some areas

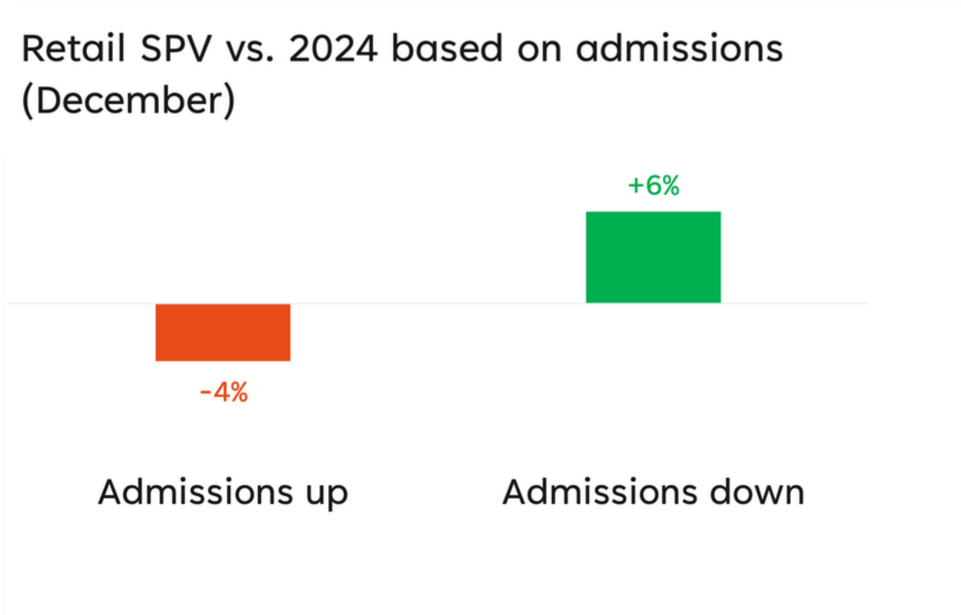
Secondary spend

Admissions trends rightly receive a lot of focus, but for many cultural venues, high visitor numbers do not necessarily translate to a strong commercial performance. Spend in catering and retail is also important, and in 2025 we saw mixed results across the two. Members reported a slightly above-inflation rise in spend per visitor (SPV) for catering (+4%) and a below-inflation rise for retail (+1%). Average transaction values (ATV) followed a similar pattern.





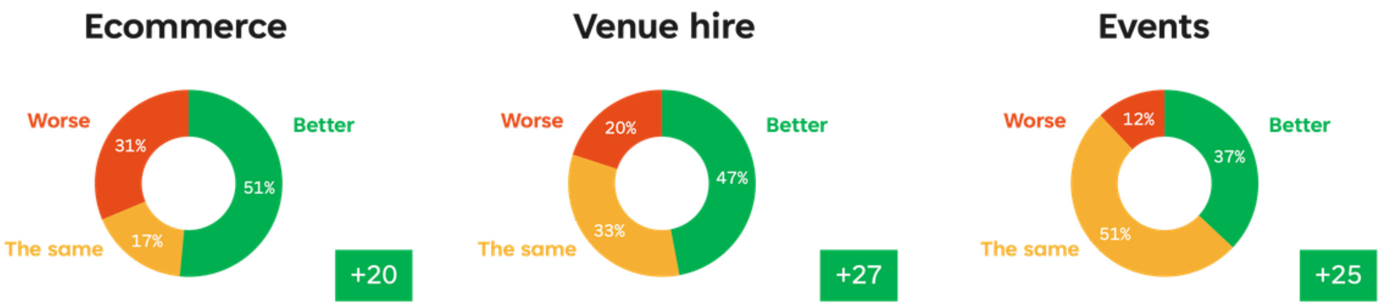
Most notably, figures from December show that venues that experienced a rise in visitor numbers, experienced a drop in retail SPV, meaning a large number of people coming through the doors were not spending any money in sites at all. This is a particular concern for free venues who are especially reliant on secondary spend.



Other key measures of commercial performance

Although admissions and retail performed below 2024, venues consistently rated their commercial performance positively in 2025. Whilst some of this sentiment may be offered in the context of low expectations, it also implies other revenue streams were performing well.

Venue hire is one of these high performing areas. Despite a below-average Christmas party season and shortening booking lead times, 47% of members described their venue hire performance as better than in 2024 (just 20% 'worse'). Events and exhibitions also performed ahead of 2024, and there were positive signs for ecommerce.



Exhibition shop, This Is What You Get, Ashmolean

KEY CHALLENGES IN 2025

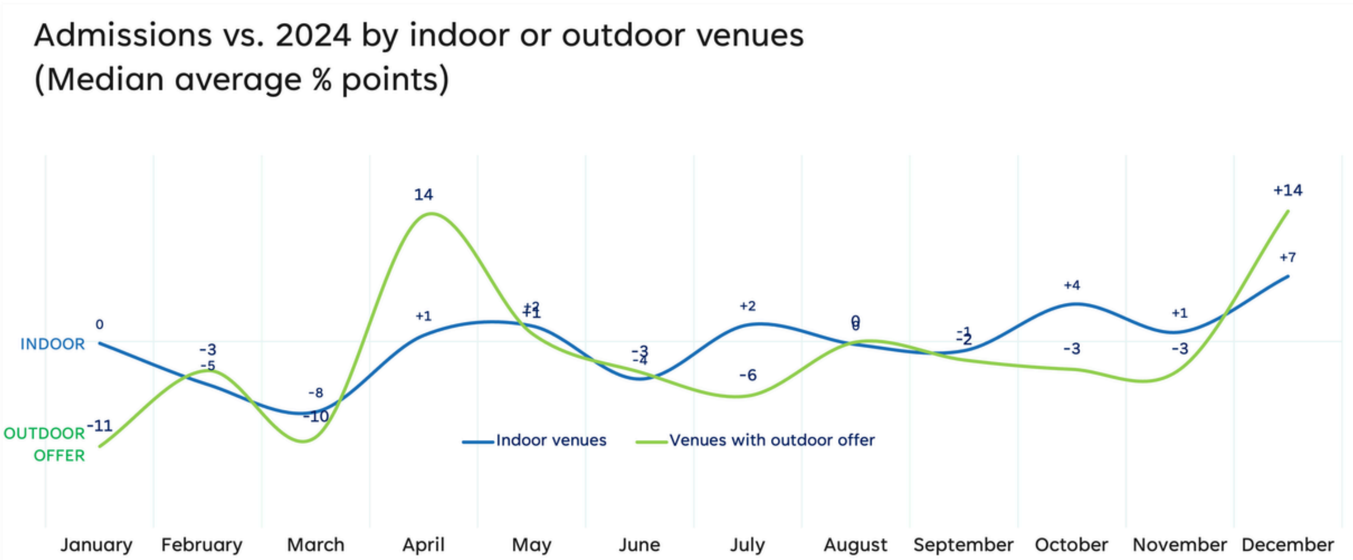
Member contributions to the Barometer highlight a range of external factors that negatively impacted commercial performance in 2025. In this section we look at the main factors including extreme weather, the cost-of-living crisis and political developments.

Extreme weather created unpredictable admissions

When asked about the main influences on commercial performance, members stated ‘weather’ more than any other reason – 16% of 2025 comments mentioning it negatively compared to 8% positively. Barometer data clearly confirms why this was the case. In January, the worst storm for 10 years meant that outdoor venues reported footfall -11% down on 2024, whilst the hot weather in April meant indoor venues were just +1% up on a year earlier (outdoor venues +14%), despite a late Easter. Similarly, wet weather at the end of July meant that outdoor venues did not get the full benefit of the school holidays.

More positively, a relatively dry and sunny December is likely to have helped drive footfall to both indoor and outdoor experiences, one venue remarking:

> **We had a strong Twixmas* period due to sustained fine dry weather which drove good footfall.**



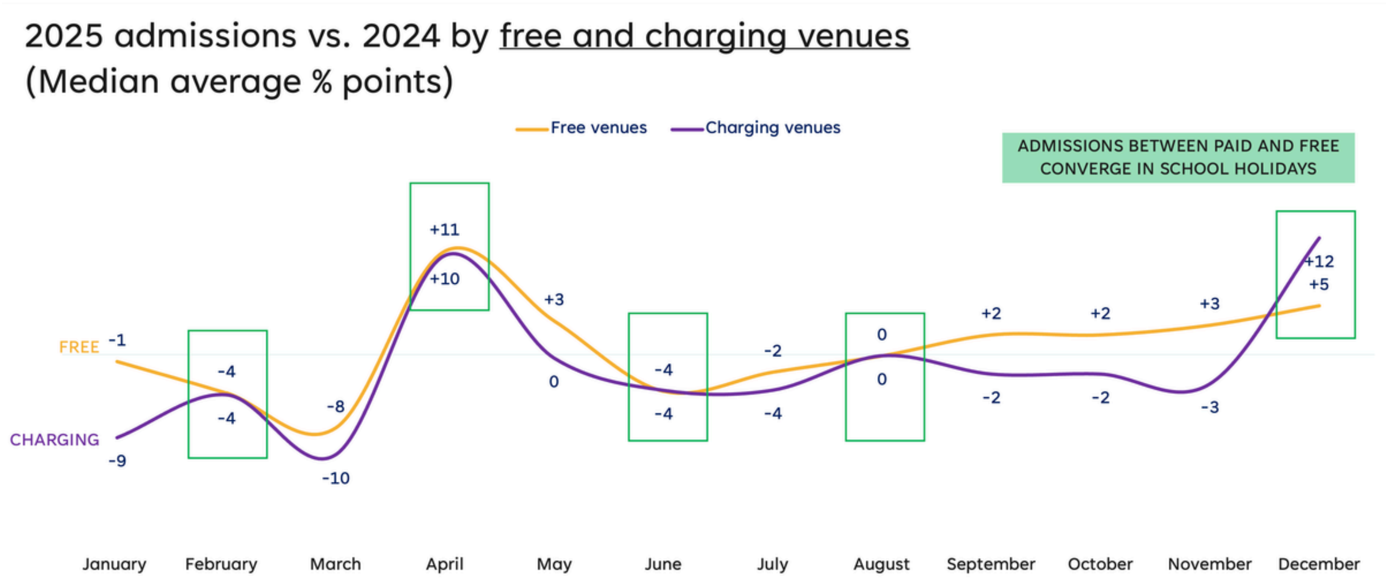
*Twixmas = the period between Christmas and New Year

Research also conducted by Decision House on behalf of Merac indicates that a majority of the public are becoming increasingly sensitive to the weather when planning their leisure. In the coming years, cultural venues will need to develop tactics and experiences that protect against these weather extremes (see final section for some ideas).

Cost-of-living challenges led to a more cautious and selective consumer

ONS data indicated that the public were more concerned about their finances in 2025 than in 2024, so it's no surprise that 'cost-of-living' was the second most mentioned driver of negative commercial performance in the Barometer. We can see the impact borne out in several ways.

A risk-averse consumer prioritising seasonal experiences: as illustrated in the previous section, 2025 admissions were high at Easter as well as over the summer and Christmas, but lower in other months – a pattern particularly obvious amongst charging venues.



This pattern suggests that consumers - particularly families - are continuing to spend on experiences during key periods of the year but holding back outside of them. It may also point to a more cautious consumer that will only commit to spending when an experience is guaranteed. The risk-averse customer is also evidenced in Decision House's Voice of the Visitor research, which shows that the public are increasingly revisiting local venues they know rather than travelling further afield to places for the first time.

Seasonal visit spikes may create new challenges for cultural venues. When visits are concentrated within smaller time periods, catering and retail facilities are more likely to get overwhelmed, which can have a negative impact on visitor conversion. A possible solution is adding food kiosks or pop-up shops during these busy periods. **National Trust for Scotland**'s Shop in a Box is a great example of this in action.

> **We introduced our Shop in a Box pop up shop concept to support our Playful Summer event at Newhailes House and Gardens during the Scottish school summer holidays. This enabled us to introduce a new range of products focussed on children and play, without impacting the range in the existing shop.**
>
> **It also meant that we could take the products to the customers, situating the unit at the entrance to the children's play area and event space. The unit generated £3.6k of income over eight weeks, a 40% increase on the previous year.**
>
> *National Trust for Scotland*

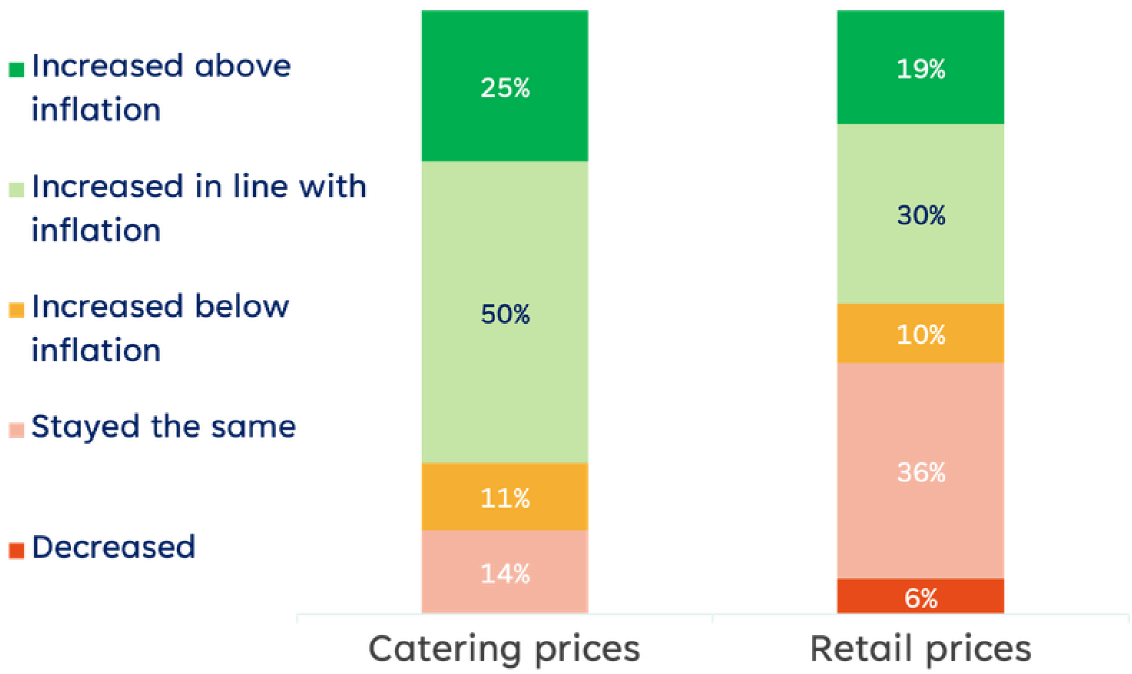
Shop in a Box,
Newhailes House and Gardens

A decline in non-essential spending: Retail is a key source of revenue for many cultural venues, not least because it offers higher margins than catering. The sluggish performance of retail relative to catering is therefore a concern for the sector.

An analysis of Barometer responses suggests the weak performance of retail may be driven by a couple of factors.

Firstly, it likely reflects the focus of price increases. Responses to a question we asked in August indicated that – perhaps due to supplier costs – organisations have tended to increase catering prices more than retail.

Product pricing in the last 12 months as of August 2025 (%)



Secondly, it likely reflects a consumer that is responding to the cost-of-living crisis by reducing non-essential spend such as gifts and souvenirs, but continuing to spend on essentials like food and drink. This may be particularly exaggerated when repeat, local visits are increasing, and one challenge for cultural venues is to offer more retail items that appeal to this audience.

Seasonal visit spikes may create new challenges for cultural venues. When visits are concentrated within smaller time periods, catering and retail facilities are more likely to get overwhelmed, which can have a negative impact on visitor conversion. A possible solution is adding food kiosks or pop-up shops during these busy periods. National Trust for Scotland's 'Shop in a Box' is a great example of this in action.

Reduced domestic tourism: VisitEngland data shows that domestic holidays declined between January and September 2025 (although day trips have slightly increased), with cost-of-living pressures a likely driver. This is a particularly negative trend for areas of the UK that benefit from domestic tourism such as the South West of England and London, and puts extra onus on them to appeal to a local audience in 2026.

US political developments have impacted visitor numbers: VisitBritain's International Passenger Survey indicates that the US is the number one source market for international tourism to the UK, so in June 2025 we asked members what impact US political developments such as tariffs had on their organisation.

20% stated developments had negatively impacted visitor numbers, with one venue saying:

> **We're seeing the impact of recent political developments with an approximate 16% drop in American ticket sales.**

The negative impact on admissions appears to be strongest at heritage attractions outside of major cities, in areas such as the West Midlands and the South West of England. Venues from these areas highlighted declining travel trade from US audiences, which is likely to have a knock-on effect on the wider local economy.

> **The American market makes up a large percentage of visitors to our site. With the reduction throughout the year, due to unstable markets and the political landscape, we have seen it directly impact our travel trade.**

It’s notable however, that members in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have not experienced this drop, suggesting the ‘US problem’ is felt more keenly in mainland Britain.

Tariffs have impacted trade: In addition to declining visitors, 23% stated that increased US tariffs had had a negative impact on retail, with challenges ranging from a drop in sales to an inability to order certain stock.

> **US tariffs have impacted trade sales in relation to publications – we’ve seen a significant fall in US sales of our publications and our agent has referred to US tariffs impacting.**

With noise about tariffs ongoing, the FIFA world cup driving up flight costs, and ‘America 250’ likely to drive more domestic US tourism, it’s unlikely we’ll see US visitors or trade returning to 2024 levels in 2026.

Horniman Museum & Gardens

POSITIVE DRIVERS OF PERFORMANCE IN 2025

Despite the significant headwinds mentioned in the previous section, a large number of cultural venues experienced a positive year in 2025. Specifically:

- 35% of venues reported more than a 3% increase in admissions
- 45% reported catering SPV more than 5% up on 2024
- 35% reported retail SPV more than 5% up on 2024.

There were also strong performances for venue hire, events and exhibitions. Responses to the Barometer highlight six broad themes that have contributed to these positive outcomes:

- Commercially friendly programming
- Programming that responds to moments and mindsets
- National and local partnerships
- Premium experiences
- Responsiveness and innovation
- A commercial organisational mindset.

Commercially friendly programming

When members are asked to state the main influences on their commercial performance, ‘programming’ (including exhibitions, events, tours etc) is consistently the number one positive mention. Many venues highlighted examples of how commercially friendly programming has driven admissions, increased dwell time, and prompted on-site spend and donations. Following the launch of a commercially successful summer exhibition after a less successful spring, one venue stated:

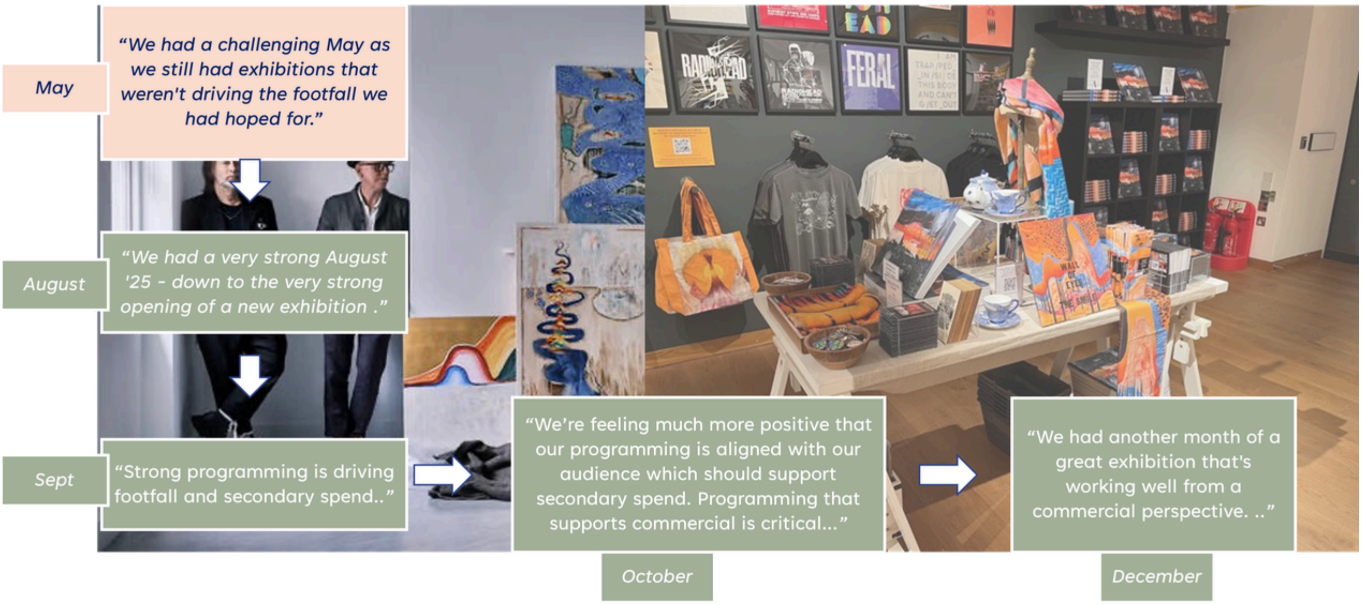
> **We’re feeling much more positive that our programming is aligned with our audience which should support secondary spend. Programming that supports commercial is critical.**

Underlining this point, there was frustration when programming did not take commercial needs into consideration. The comment below captures the concern that was communicated across a range of sites this year:

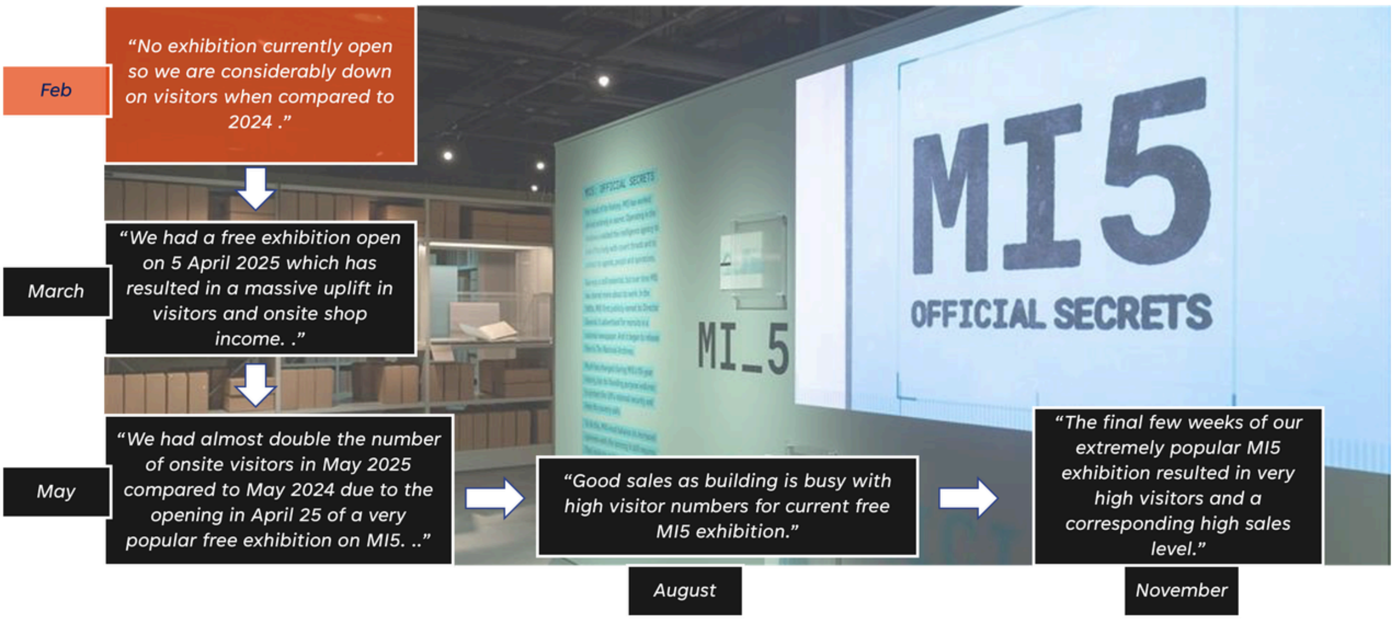
> **We have some challenging, less accessible and less commercial/family friendly exhibitions coming up and I am worried about the impact of this on our income compared to the shows we had last year.**

The **Cartoon Museum**'s *Cats in Cartoons* exhibition is an excellent example of commercially friendly programming. Not only did it attract visitors to the site, but it also drove a big increase in retail SPV, as well as revenue through successful out-of-hours events. The below image showing Barometer responses from the Cartoon Museum through the year, clearly illustrates the exhibition's impact.

The **Ashmolean**'s *This is What You Get* exhibition also delivered strong commercial outcomes, with retail SPV significantly higher than in 2024 for the duration of the exhibition run. As these comments demonstrate, *This is What You Get* is particularly pertinent because of the challenges the venue was facing before its opening. The exhibition was curated with Thom Yorke of Radiohead, showcasing the success of working with unusual and popular partners.



A final example of note was **The National Archives**' MI5 exhibition, which was so popular that it turned a year-on-year admissions 'deficit' of -25% as of April to an impressive surplus of +71% by the end of December. Through sheer weight of visitor numbers this also led to a significant increase in retail revenue.



Programming that responds to moments and mindsets

As already outlined, spikes in admissions during Easter, summer and Christmas point to a consumer that is demanding experiences at key moments in the year It also shines a light on a cultural sector that is meeting this demand with outstanding programming.

December 2025 was the most obvious example of this, the Barometer awash with commercially successful experiences, ranging from light shows such as *Castle of Light* at **Edinburgh Castle** – which beat both its admissions and retail targets – to more holistic and localised programming such as at **Titanic Belfast** and **English Heritage**:

> **We hosted a festive Christmas Market in our main atrium over the weekends leading up to Christmas. It was open to the public and free to attend which was a good opportunity for messaging and for encouraging additional spend in the outlets for those that were not there to visit the main exhibition. We also ran the Annual Magical Christmas Experience with a strong programme of marketing and billboards across the city which kept the attraction front and centre in the mind of the domestic audience. There was also a consumer Christmas event with a choir in the galleries.**
>
> *Titanic Belfast*

> **Site specific Christmas programming of community focused events saw an increase in footfall to sites during normal trading hours. Events included Christmas craft markets, community wreath making workshops, meet Father Christmas and Christmas themed trails at our garden sites.**
>
> *English Heritage*

There were numerous examples of seasonal programming earlier in the year, including Easter trails, **National Trust**'s 'Summer of Play', and Halloween activities at venues such as **PK Porthcurno**:

> **We put on a Halloween event on 30-31 October for the first time. It was very successful so helped improve our visitor numbers in comparison to 2024.**
>
> *PK Porthcurno*

Christmas, Easter, summer and Halloween are all times of the year when people are actively looking for memorable moments at cultural venues, but what also stood out in 2025 was the extent to which venues had responded to mindsets at other times of the year. **Royal Armouries**' *Standing with Giants* installation at Fort Nelson is a great example of this. Whilst impactful installations at war-related venues are nothing new, the commercial impact of *Standing with Giants*, which drove huge spend up to the end of January, went above and beyond the usual commemorative experiences.

> ***Standing with Giants* has had a huge commercial impact. It has pushed admissions ahead of target and resulted in high retail spend as well as lots of donations which exceeded the installation costs.**
>
> *Royal Armouries*

The **Roman Baths** responded to the mindset evoked by warm summer evenings with a successful *Summer Lates* programme:

> **Our *Summer Lates* programme of DJs around the Great Bath on Friday and Saturday evenings, with an acoustic set on Sundays, drove footfall as well as good publicity and record bar spends.**
>
> *Roman Baths*

At the other end of the spectrum, we saw **Liverpool Cathedral** exploring the early year mindset with *Threads through the Bible* - a commercially impactful installation that ran from January to March:

> **We have an art installation and it has been much more busy and popular than we anticipated. We have seen large increases in daily footfall, there have been queues out the door for the bistro and shop most days, and merchandise for the exhibition is selling extremely well. The car park has seen a similar uplift.**
>
> *Liverpool Cathedral*

Old Royal Naval College achieved something similar, suggesting there may be potential for more venues to programme exhibitions aimed at a local, more traditional audience at the start of the year.

> **We have found programming our installations in the winter months means we are providing an urgent reason to visit for local and UK based audiences who are also booking additional experiences and events that we are programming around the installations.**
>
> *Old Royal Naval College*

National and local partnerships

For some (often smaller) organisations, partnerships with well-known organisations can have a strong commercial impact.

In August, **Clifton Suspension Bridge** enjoyed their best August since the pandemic thanks in part to the bridge being a site for the *Gromit Unleashed 3* trail. Similarly, Cliffe Castle's partnership with the **British Museum** for their *Ice Age Art Now* exhibition drove a double digit increase in visitors, and almost doubled their retail spend per visitor.

As outlined by the **BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art**, partnerships with local organisations through Christmas markets demonstrated the value of partnerships with local businesses to drive footfall in typically quiet periods.

We held our annual Christmas market which increased secondary spend in the shop and cafe. Footfall usually drops considerably in November and December and so we try and punctuate the calendar with events we know will be popular during these months.

BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art

Premium experiences

Despite the financial challenges facing the majority of the population, around one in seven of the UK public are unaffected by the cost-of-living crisis, and many of these are seeking out premium experiences, regardless of cost. For cultural venues, meeting this demand can generate key revenue, enabling them to more easily fund social and charitable goals.

Well-known sector examples of premium experiences include the Director's Tour of **Edinburgh Zoo** (£5,000), marmalade sandwiches delivered to your seat at the *Paddington* musical (£34) and the Tim Burton themed afternoon tea at the **Design Museum** (£64).

We also saw some examples of premium experiences in the Barometer this year. The below examples from **English Heritage** and **Royal & Derngate** highlight a premium catering offer:

Osborne House launched a premium Sunday lunch offer which has had a positive effect on SPV growth against last year and has brought in positive feedback.

English Heritage

We opened a premium café bar with a concession serving tapas and cocktails pre and post theatre. We are currently achieving £21 SPT (vs a target of £15) and our income target has been beaten by a minimum of 20% every month since opening.

Royal & Derngate

The **Cartoon Museum** explored the premium opportunity with exclusive products in their shop.

> **We have benefited from having a high value, exclusive signed print to sell. This was promoted as part of an online competition which also helped to raise awareness of the Museum and brought people to the online shop. We gained large numbers of followers as a result.**
>
> *The Cartoon Museum*

The **Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre** saw the benefits with premium priced workshops.

> **We trialled some new workshops - some at a higher price point and others at a lower level. Those who visited on the high price point workshop also spent more on secondary spend.**
>
> *Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre*

As we progress through 2026, the demand for premium experiences remains an opportunity.

Responsiveness and innovation

In challenging and unpredictable times, the ability of cultural organisations to react to circumstances and innovate is a strong indicator of commercial success. The **BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art**'s *Road to Wembley* exhibition is an example of responsiveness in action.

> **We partnered with Newcastle United FC to host a showcase of the club's *Road to Wembley*. We treated it as a hire, so generated income from the hire fee of the space, but as it was open to the public we benefited from secondary spend in the shop and café. It attracted over 21,000 visitors, including many first time visitors, and strong turnover in our shop.**
>
> *BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art*

Titanic Belfast opening their shop during a city conference also stands out in this regard:

> **We kept the retail store open on the evening of a large city conference at our venue, and it proved to be very beneficial from a revenue point of view as it was the only shopping opportunity many had whilst in the city.**
>
> *Titanic Belfast*

For innovation, we need look no further than **Old Royal Naval College**, who have provided multiple examples of creative thinking throughout the year – from successful Guinness Record attempts to events such as *Labyrinth on the Thame*s that brought new audiences and revenue through venue hire.

There were multiple examples of innovation elsewhere including a murder mystery app bringing in new visitors at **Saffron Waldon Museum**, partnerships with local funeral directors at the **Horniman Museum and Gardens**, and numerous venues introducing contactless donation terminals.

> **The *Labyrinth On The Thames* music festival has generated significant commercial revenue through venue hire and commissions. It brought an additional 57k in visitors, engaged with new audiences, saw an increase in 1.7k of followers to Instagram, and a 500% increase in traffic to the *What's On* page**
>
> *Old Royal Naval College*

Labyrinth on the Thames, Old Royal Naval College

A commercial organisational mindset

A final important theme that stands out is a culture that prioritises commercial performance. This shows up in a number of ways in the Barometer, and as a starting point requires commercial team members to have a seat at the table when programming decisions are made. In addition, it also requires an organisational appetite for exploring new ideas. **London Transport Museum** captures this with their approach to testing commercial theories:

> **Commercial teams are all testing theories from gathered data to try new things and then introducing them quickly. Customers and visitors seem to be responding well to new initiatives rather than being faced with things that have always been done.**
>
> *London Transport Museum*

We also saw this with the **Foundling Museum** and their successful 'root and branch' review of their venue hire offer:

> **In 2023-24, our venue hire revenue was performing considerably below potential and to combat this we:**
>
> - Rebranded venue hire, introducing a new tagline, *A Space with Heart*
> - Embraced demand for day hires with new offers such as conference packages for historic rooms
> - Created an affordable evening offer
> - Negotiated a flexible closure policy for day hires in historic rooms
> - Invested in in-house tech and AV
> - Developed private tours for less popular venue nights
>
> **The result was day hires doubling, evening hires increasing by 75%, and income growing significantly.**
>
> *Foundling Museum*

Organisations such as **Imperial War Museums, English Heritage,** the **Chester Beatty Library** and the **Freud Museum** apply this approach at a more micro level with selective price increases and special offers:

> **We introduced a new tote bag + guidebook offer in late May 2025 which has benefitted guidebook strike rate and revenue as a result. This is following success at Stonehenge and will be rolled out to further sites.**
>
> *English Heritage*

> **Strong visitor numbers and some price increases on key sellers delivered growth in July.**
>
> *Imperial War Museums*

> **We increased the price of postcards from 50 to 75 cents when we made a few new designs. Customers don't seem to mind the steep price change.**
>
> *Chester Beatty Library*

> **We sell A6 postcards for £1 but recently started introducing mantelpiece A5 cards which we sell for £4. These have sold very well so we have introduced more popular images of Freud and the collection as mantelpiece postcards instead of standard postcards. This has started bringing us more revenue and generating more profit.**
>
> *Freud Museum*

Imperial War Museums also stand out for their impressive guidebook conversion rates – their 5.6% conversion at IWM London in July, more than four times higher than the national average at free venues (1.3%) and higher even than the average at charging sites (4.0%). Here, this commercial mindset relates to a culture of upselling – any visitor that enters their venue will be offered a guidebook as soon as they walk through the door.

KEY PRIORITIES FOR 2026

The Commercial Performance Barometer paints a picture of a cultural sector that is surviving, and sometimes thriving, in difficult times. Based on all of the responses and best practice we have received, we have collated five focus areas that we hope will enable more of you to thrive in 2026:

1. **Commercially-friendly programming:** It’s impossible to underestimate the power of programming in delivering revenue. For many in 2025 it was the main difference between a good and a bad year, so it is definitely top of our list for 2026. But not all programming is equal – some audiences are less likely to spend on site than others, whilst some subject-matter doesn’t lend itself to retail spend. Ensuring on-site spend is maximised should be an essential condition in the decision-making process.

2. **Embrace seasonal moments, and create new ones:** It’s clear that an increasingly risk-averse population is saving their leisure spend for memorable experiences at key points in the year. Meeting this need should be a top priority for cultural venues. Events don’t need to be cookie-cutter replicas of what everyone else is doing. They should be authentic to a venue, with a focus on delivering memorable experiences.

Explore other moments throughout the year. Ten years ago December was a moderately performing month, but for many venues in 2025, it saved their year. Are there other untapped moments in the year that you haven’t explored? Halloween is an obvious one, but perhaps your venue offers opportunities at other times? **Liverpool Cathedral** and **Old Royal Naval College** have demonstrated the value of programming at the start of the year – particularly for traditional exhibitions that will attract an older time-rich and cash-rich audience looking for things to do. We recommend a review of the moments you can embrace.

3. **Mitigate against extreme weather:** In 2025 extreme weather had a devastating impact on visitor numbers for some venues, so it goes without saying that venues should do all they can to mitigate against this in 2026. Obvious tactics include incentivising visitors to commit to trips early through discounted advance booking, ‘de-risking’ advance booking by offering date transfers, and creating a sense of urgency through time-limited programming. On site, venues may want to consider diversifying to a mixed indoor/outdoor offer, adding areas of shade, and reducing queueing.

4. **Test and review:** Venues that report successful initiatives tend to have an organisational culture than supports trying new things – see **Old Royal Naval College**’s Guinness Record attempt. While it’s easier for us to suggest this than for you to do, evidence from the Barometer suggests it can pay dividends. In 2025 we saw numerous venues reach out to new audiences – from families with holiday programming or play areas, to younger people with dance festivals. This is hardly a new (or easy) recommendation but it feels particularly pertinent at a time when current audiences are getting squeezed.

5. **Get a seat at the table:** Finally, we recommend commercial teams are front and centre of key decision-making, particularly programming. This can be the main difference between a successful year commercially, and a year where difficult decisions can be made. This obviously requires buy-in from the leadership team, but hopefully this report has provided evidence of the benefits that seat can bring.

Imperial War Museums

Find Out More

The Commercial Performance Barometer is a monthly survey providing invaluable insights into audience and commercial performance. Users can compare their results with the wider sector via an interactive and segmented dashboard, identifying key drivers and examples of best practice.

Access to the survey and dashboard is available to Association for Cultural Enterprises members only. To find out more about membership and the Commercial Performance Barometer please email or visit the website.

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