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Call for proposals Coalhouse Fort Creative Commission

Commission Budget: £20,000 including production / materials and VAT where applicable

Location: Coalhouse Fort, East Tilbury (Thurrock)

Deadline: midnight, Tuesday 17 June 2025

Interviews: Monday 7 July

Intro

Start Thurrock (Creative People and Places) and Essex Cultural Diversity Project have teamed up to invite proposals for a creative project that explores new ways to engage the public with the heritage of Coalhouse Fort in East Tilbury, Thurrock.

The commission is part of our joint work to celebrate diversity, provide a platform for marginalised voices, and empower residents to decide what kind of creative activity they want to experience in their own neighbourhoods. We are seeking a project that can be shaped with communities, foster a sense of local pride and ownership, and help residents value and invest in the future of this important cultural asset on their doorstep.

Putting the voice of the community at its heart, the project should aim to broaden engagement with Coalhouse Fort and deepen understanding of its historical significance through a bold, impactful, place-based creative project. It should generate and test out new ideas, harnessing the power of art and storytelling to help visualise and articulate possible futures for this monument.

The commission comes at a key moment for Coalhouse Fort and culture in Thurrock, and will help to inform future engagement strategies, with learning shared widely with cultural stakeholders across the region.

This opportunity is open to creatives and arts/cultural organisations, including artists, makers, producers and curators working across the creative industries, based in, or with a strong connection to, Essex, Thurrock or Southend. We are open to collaborative proposals where creatives work together. Creatives at all stages of their career are welcome to apply.

FULL COMMISSION BRIEF

Start Thurrock (Creative People and Places) and Essex Cultural Diversity Project have teamed up to invite proposals for a creative project that explores new ways to engage the public with the heritage of Coalhouse Fort in East Tilbury, Thurrock.

Coalhouse Fort is a late nineteenth-century Fort built on the recommendation of the Royal Commission of the Defence of the UK 1860 ("The Palmerston Commission"). It is one of the finest examples of an armoured casemate Fort in England and is well documented historically. Coalhouse Fort is owned by Thurrock Council and has been closed to the public since 2020. The site is designated as a Scheduled Monument and is included on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register.

Coalhouse Fort has been closed to the public in recent years and sits on the Historic England 'Heritage at Risk' register. Responding to this designation, Thurrock Council has recently commissioned a feasibility study to determine future strategic leadership of the site and a plan for conservation and future sustainability. The study has identified the opportunity to conserve and reopen parts of the Gatehouse, Parade Ground and Casemates as the first step in conserving the overall site. A new Advisory Group has formed to steer proposals to establish a new governance vehicle, a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) to take over operations, provide independent strategic leadership, and to leverage partnership and funding opportunities independent of Thurrock Council, the owner. The feasibility study included a wide-reaching public consultation to determine demand for reanimating key areas of the site. The Feasibility and Options Study will be made public in early June.

It is within this context that Start Thurrock and Essex Cultural Diversity Project are coming together to commission a creative project that responds to the history of the Fort and surrounding areas and will involve broad and diverse communities in the project development. The project will provide opportunities to test new approaches to public engagement with culture.

The commission comes at a key moment for Coalhouse Fort and culture in Thurrock. A new 'Plan for Culture' was launched in early 2025 and sets out a direction for change in Thurrock, with plans to activate spaces and places with creative and cultural activity, celebrating Thurrock's unique heritage and diverse cultural offer. Overall, this project will help to inform future engagement strategies and activity plans at Coalhouse Fort and learning will be shared widely with cultural stakeholders across Thurrock.

The project should aim to broaden engagement with Coalhouse Fort and deepen understanding of its historical significance through a bold, impactful, place-based creative project. The project should also aim to test new engagement methods to build collective understanding of what works (and what doesn't) when involving the community as participants and audiences.

We welcome interest from creative practitioners from every background, working independently or part of a collective, particularly those who have a socially engaged and participatory practice. The format and content of the project would be shaped by the creative practitioner as well as the communities they work alongside.

Coalhouse Fort has been designated a Scheduled Monument by Historic England. The surrounding areas are subject to conservation management schemes and designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Protection Area (SPA) by Natural England. The area is also a Ramsar site. Consent may need to be obtained from Historic England and/or Natural England for certain events and activities. The creative practitioner will need to give due consideration to these factors, and be prepared to be flexible and responsive to opportunities and limitations during the delivery of the project. Given the site considerations, we expect to see a project that is durational with multiple touch points for the public.

We anticipate that the project will run from June to October 2025. Over this period – subject to permissions and approvals from the owner, Thurrock Council and Historic England and/or Natural England - Coalhouse Fort can be accessed and used as a venue for project meetings, community workshops and public engagement activity.

Commissioned creative practitioners will be supported by the Start Thurrock team, who can assist with permissions, stakeholder relationships and community engagement. However, it should be noted that the commissioned creatives will need to be self-sufficient. You will be responsible for project management and delivery of activity, including maintaining community relations and communicating with the community about activity you will deliver that involves them.

Who can apply

This opportunity is open to creatives and arts/cultural organisations, including artists, makers, producers and curators working across the creative industries, based in (or with a strong connection to) Essex, Thurrock or Southend. We are open to collaborative proposals where creatives work together. Creatives at all stages of their career are welcome to apply. Please check the FAQs about who can and who can't apply.

How to respond to this opportunity

We accept **written**, **verbal** and **video** proposals for this commission.

To apply, please email your response to jo@essexcdp.com by midnight on Tuesday 17 June 2025.

Please set your response on no more than 5 pages, including images and weblinks if useful. Your proposal should tell us the following:

- The title of your proposed project
- An outline of the artistic concept and its creative starting points and intended participants and any groups you may like to work with (if known), and your community engagement process (no more than 800 words).
- How your practice and project explores or promotes diversity and inclusion, and your connection to Essex, Thurrock or Southend (no more than 250 words).
- Some info about you and your work. This could be a short biography/artist statement with visual examples of previous work / a CV / links to your website and social media.
- A budget showing how you would utilise the £20,000 (including VAT)
- A short approximate timeline for the work
- A completed Commissioning Monitoring Form - <https://bit.ly/ecdp-commissions2025-6> (please note on some computers this document goes direct to your downloads folder once clicked)

Proposals can be submitted in written form or voice/video recorded. Recordings should be no more than 8 minutes in length.

Further Support & Accessibility

If you have accessibility needs and would like us to talk this brief through with you, we'd be very happy to offer support with a 1-2-1. Please email Jo on jo@essexcdp.com to arrange a meeting.

It is highly recommended that you visit the **Essex Cultural Diversity Project Commissions Frequently Asked Questions** page at <https://essexcdp.com/commission-faqs-coalhouse-fort/> which has supporting information and practical advice to support you in putting a proposal together.

We are committed to making our application process accessible and can be adaptable to your needs. We welcome proposals in various formats, such as a written, video or audio proposals, or via a recorded Zoom call. To request a text / audio / large print version of this brief, contact Jo at jo@essexcdp.com

Criteria for selection

- Response to the brief and relevance to 'Place'
- Creative Practice
- Diversity and potential benefits to participants
- Track record and project management

Selection Process

The shortlisting of proposals will be led by Start Thurrock and Essex Cultural Diversity Project. As a Creative People and Places programme, Start Thurrock's approach and values are rooted in involving communities in decision-making. East Tilbury residents will be involved in the selection and awarding process for this commission.

Start Thurrock and Essex Cultural Diversity Project are committed to fair pay for creatives. Shortlisted applicants will receive a fee for preparing and attending an interview

About Start Thurrock

Start Thurrock is our plan to support Thurrock residents to step forward and take the lead in selecting ambitious and inclusive cultural activity and experiences which in turn, grows broader and deeper cultural engagement amongst local audiences. Start Thurrock responds to low levels of engagement in arts and culture relative to the national picture. We want to increase engagement by facilitating public-led cultural programming that develop place, increase cultural supply and demand, and grow quality and ambition by placing communities in the driving seat of cultural provision.

Start Thurrock is a Creative People and Places programme, hosted by Tilbury on the Thames Trust as lead accountable body and member of our Core Consortium along with Thurrock Council, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions CIC, Thurrock CVS and Royal Ballet & Opera.

Our work, including films and case studies, can be explored here: www.StartThurrock.org

About Essex Cultural Diversity Project

Since 2007 Essex Cultural Diversity Project has been bringing together artists, museums, libraries, performers and writers with local authorities and commissioners to improve and enhance artistic and cultural diversity, ensure that excellence is thriving, and that cultural integration and understanding is supported through arts and cultural activity. ECDP is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) working across the East of England to support diversity in arts and cultural practice.

Within our commissioning programme, Essex Cultural Diversity Project works closely with partner organisations to help artists explore diversity and develop participant-led, socially engaged practices. Commissions capture the spirit of place, give people a voice, connect communities and let people tell their own story in their own words.

You can get a good overview of our past and present commissions at <https://essexcdp.com/commissions/>