

Annual Review

April 2025 – March 2026



Welcome to Essex Cultural Diversity Project's Annual Review for 2025–26

Essex Cultural Diversity Project energises diversity in arts and heritage across the East of England. Our mission is to create opportunities, stimulate participation and provide a focal point for the development and celebration of diversity through arts and heritage activity.

Essex Cultural Diversity Project is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.

Visit us at essexcdp.com



Foreword: Miriam Stead, Chair of Essex Cultural Diversity Project

I love this time of year when we take some time to look back over the achievements of the last twelve months. It's always a pleasure to present to you Essex Cultural Diversity Project's Annual Review, celebrating another excellent year of festivals, commissions, exhibitions, projects and events.

It's been a bumper programme, reaching over 100,000 attendees across the region and beyond, engaging over 2,500 community participants, and directly supporting more than 300 creative practitioners.

The weather has certainly been on our side with lots of outdoor activity for all to enjoy, from dancing to Bhangra in the sunshine at *Thetford Mela*, listening to African storytelling in the gardens of the National Trust's Rainham Hall, to taking part in Tai-Chi on Jaywick Sands at *Bhaji on the Beach*.

Community cohesion is always at the heart of our work, and we do it well! 100% of audiences surveyed this year agreed projects and events had helped them understand and value different cultures, and 98% felt welcome and included, no matter what their background.

Our Creative Health programme continues to grow, as we harness the power of creativity to help improve people's mental and physical health. We've had beach walks along the Tendring coast, as well as forest walks in Epping, and dance for young people in Chelmsford, bringing communities together to be active and keep fit.

As a small organisation with a strong focus on collaboration, we value our partnerships with councils, funders, and other arts and heritage organisations, working towards shared goals of improving community wellbeing, championing the environment, addressing inequality, and contributing to local economies.

Thank you to all the creatives, audiences and participants who have come together this year, and to Arts Council England, Essex County Council and other funders and partners who have supported us and our community. Thank you to our patrons The Singh Twins, to ECDP's core team for all their hard work, and our trustees for their continued support.



Image credit: Global Village: *Bhaji on the Beach* in Jaywick

Creative Health: Harnessing Creativity for Wellbeing

As members of the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance, we are dedicated to improving people's mental and physical health, using the power of arts and heritage to foster community cohesion, build strong connections to nature, and get people moving.

Coastal Walks: Clacton to Jaywick

The *Coastal Walks* project took place along the Tendring coast and engaged diverse communities with the outdoors and green spaces on their doorstep.

In partnership with Colchester Chinese Culture Society and funded by Active Essex, the project comprised a series of walks with warm up dance, talks and health awareness activities.



Forest Walks: Epping

A day of walking in Epping Forest marked the start of the Chinese New Year with Chinese communities from Colchester, Chelmsford and Epping. The session began with light warm up exercises including Tai Chi and Qigong-Ba Duan, a foundational Chinese qigong consisting of eight gentle, flowing movements that integrate mind, body and breath to improve overall health, balancing energy flow and strengthening the body.



Arts & Health Chelmsford

The *Keep Fit Through Dance* project was funded by Essex Community Foundation and encouraged young people from diverse communities to engage with arts and culture through traditional artforms from the Subcontinent, supporting their mental health and wellbeing. We worked with dance instructor Sree Lalitha Kotla at Chelmer Village Hall for ten weeks, inviting those aged 10-18 years to learn Sree Kuchipudi, a South Indian dance style. The sessions were well attended by the South Indian community in Chelmsford, successfully demonstrating how the arts can play a major role in supporting physical activity.



Global Village

Global Village events take place across the East of England, celebrating music, song, performance and dance by artists from all corners of the world. Events bring together diverse communities within a vibrant festival setting.



Bhaji on the Beach, Jaywick

Community groups from Jaywick, Clacton, Colchester, Chelmsford and Ipswich were invited to bring picnics to share on the beach and enjoy entertainment at the Sunspot. The event was part of Kinetika’s *Beach of Dreams*, a celebration of coastlines and their communities across the UK.



Global Village Rochford

A day of entertainment and a Diwali concert by ‘the Nightingale of the Punjab’ Raj Heer at the Freight House, a beautifully restored former British Rail goods shed in the centre of Rochford. Supported by Rochford District Council and funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Thank you to all the creative practitioners who joined the *Global Village* community this year, including Jitty Bajaj, Circus Raj, Colchester Chinese Culture Society, Kim Davey, Samantha Everitt, Raj Heer, Veena Jain, Kinetika People, Jaymini Nakum, Julia Obasa, DJ Pam, Dipika Patel, Rochford Hindu Temple, Rudebone, the Saheli Group, Southend Tamil School, Southend Sivan Kovil, TriggerBliss, Usifu Jalloh aka the Cowfoot Prince, Vedance Studio, and Lu Yu.



Global Village Rainham Hall

We teamed up with the National Trust to put on a free family cultural event in the gardens of Rainham Hall. Visitors enjoyed acrobatics with Circus Raj, Bollywood dancing, henna hand painting and African storytelling.



Chinese New Year, Harwich

We supported Colchester Chinese Culture Society and Harwich Festival with a special event to mark the Chinese New Year, welcoming in the Year of the Horse.

What our audiences said:

“Events like this must happen because they bring communities together” Attendee, Global Village Rainham Hall

“Interactive and community building ... [feeding] the exchange and sharing of our culture. This sort of event brings communities together and creates bonds” Attendee, Bhaji on the Beach

Festival of Thetford & Punjab 2025

The *Festival of Thetford & Punjab* was a cross-cultural celebration inspired by the people of Thetford and the Duleep Singh family, the last Royal Family of the Punjab who lived in nearby Elveden.

In honour of the festival, our programming partners at the Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life opened their doors for free all weekend, celebrating the museum’s centenary year with new displays and fun activities for all. The Thomas Paine Hotel held its *Annual Curry Night*, providing lively entertainment and a three-course meal with authentic Punjabi dishes, and we finished the festival in style with the *Thetford Mela*, a day of music, performance and dance at Thetford Grammar School.

Audience Highlights:

“It’s a great event for the town... Brilliant event to bring all the community together”.

“Well organised, different vibes, something new for me that I have never experienced. Different cultures coming together, engaging, learning about our history”.

“Music, people connecting and friendliness. Beautiful and knowledgeable”

“To see the Punjabi community celebrating tradition and culture and remembering the essence of community spirit.”



This Year's Commissions

Essex Cultural Diversity Project works closely with organisations around the East of England to help creative practitioners explore diversity and develop their participant-led arts practice. Commissions capture the spirit of place, give people a voice, connect communities and let people tell their own story in their own words.

TriggerBliss and Kim Davey: A Parade of Self

TriggerBliss and Kim Davey's commission focused on women across Suffolk and Essex, celebrating community, diversity and the power of the written and spoken word. Through a series of workshops launched on International Women's Day, the artists invited participants to explore how words can signify strength and self-assurance. 'Empowerment fabrics' with personal affirmations were paraded at festivals and carnivals throughout the region.



Cobnuts: Finding Lost Nature Words

Cobnuts eco-artist collective delivered an environment-focused project for communities in Tendring, capturing diverse voices to enable nature stories from different childhoods to be told and remembered. They spent time with people from different generations and cultural backgrounds, recording their stories, creating *Listening Stations* and delivering creative workshops. Memories and nature words collected during the project have been transformed into a large-scale wildlife habitat artwork on the front wall of Brightlingsea Library.



Moving House Films: The Changing Faces of Diss

We teamed up with Diss Corn Hall, DesignerMakers21 and No 8 Market Place to celebrate the changing faces of Diss. We commissioned Moving House Films, who created a participatory film project inviting residents to retrace their footsteps down memory lane. Through collaborative and playful re-creation, this project captured Diss as shaped by personal and collective memory. Participants became active storytellers, and the final work was presented with a red-carpet film premiere and exhibition trail across the host venues.



The Cultural Assembly: To Lavenham with Love

We once again partnered with the National Trust, this time to explore the past, present and future of Lavenham Guildhall. The Cultural Assembly ran creative workshops and activities, inviting residents to create a multimedia love letter on how they feel about and what they desire from this iconic space. With the aim to bridge the Guildhall's storied past with the present day lives and future aspirations of Lavenham's community, the artists created a suite of digital assets, including an interactive and creative 360-degree tour.



Laura Trevail: Coalhouse Fort Thurrock

In partnership with Start Thurrock, we commissioned artist and writer Laura Trevail to engage Thurrock residents to help shape the future of Coalhouse Fort. Laura ran creative workshops, activities and tours to explore heritage and history, and share personal stories around the theme of ghosts. The project helped foster a sense of local pride and ownership, encouraging residents to invest in this important cultural asset on their doorstep. Laura created a 'Wayfinding' document that will enable residents to make use of Coalhouse Fort more easily in the future, help articulate their connections to the building, and how to carry that forward for generations.



Dulce Duca: Witham and I

Contemporary circus performer Dulce Duca spent time with communities in Witham to co-create *Witham and I*, a comic, poetic and unpredictable show, commissioned in partnership with Witham Town Council. The show was performed at Witham Street Entertainment Festival, featuring juggling, a community band, circus skills, local community artists, and a sound installation with Witham voices.



Gemma Garwood: Storylines – Remembering Roads to Healing

For her Creative Health mini-commission, Gemma Garwood used folklore, practice, art and knowledge to build connections, honour traditions and imagine healing futures for Tendring folk from working-class and Romani/Pavee backgrounds. Participants took part in straw craft, storytelling, hedgerow healing and home remedy workshops. The artist created a new zine mapping sites of shared significance and celebrating local memory and knowledge.



Salons

Essex Cultural Diversity Project runs a programme of networking events offering professional support, insight and training to creative practitioners working in diversity, in collaboration with partners across the East of England. Here's an overview of the Salons and associated events we delivered this year.



Lowestoft and Saxmundham Salons

In October 2025 we teamed up with Counterpoints Arts' *Platforma Festival*, which takes place in a different region every two years. Their mission is to support and create transformative art by, with, and about migrants and refugees, exploring how their stories shape our culture and change how we see displacement. The 8th *Platforma Festival* took place across the East of England, providing an excellent opportunity for us to focus on intercultural arts provision for migrant, refugee and asylum seeker communities.

The Lowestoft Salon was held at the Battery of Ideas, the coastal town's new cultural quarter development, in partnership with First Light Festival CIC. The Saxmundham Salon was hosted by The Art Station, in partnership with Britten Pears Art, and brought in voices from the recently displaced Ukrainian community and Suffolk Refugee Support.



King's Lynn Salon

Hosted by GroundWork Gallery, the King's Lynn Salon provided hands-on advice about engaging with communities and applying for public funds for community art projects.



Sudbury Salon

The Sudbury Salon was organised by Essex Cultural Diversity Project in partnership with Gainsborough's House, Sudbury Arts Centre and Quay Theatre. Creative workshops were provided by Sudbury Arts Centre, giving attendees the opportunity to be creative together.

Socially-Engaged Art Practice in the East: Ports, Portals and New Possibilities

In addition to our Salons we led an Action Learning Lab *Creating Joy in Diversity* at this symposium in Felixstowe, initiated by Pier Projects, co-convened by Take a Part and in partnership with Fine Art at University of Suffolk.

Stand Up for Diversity

Stand Up for Diversity is a series of regular events bringing together creative practitioners, community leaders and audiences who want to champion diversity in the arts and in our communities. Events are an opportunity for all to share their work, opinions and passions on a public platform.

Stand Up for Diversity Brentwood

We helped launch Brentwood International Cultural Festival 2025 with a *Stand Up for Diversity* event alongside a Peruvian themed art workshop for children with Peque Arts. Ten speakers shared what diversity means to them, from working with neurodiverse children, setting up the Black and Being Essex (BABE) network, settling in the UK from Hong Kong, and the need for honest conversations about mental health.



CALFE Festival 2025

We supported this year's CALFE Festival taking place at Saffron Walden Museum. *Books, Our Bridge to Bigger Dreams* was a day of culturally diverse storytelling, arts and activities for families, as part of Black History Month in October. The event spotlighted authors and illustrators from culturally diverse backgrounds, including Jamaican, Zimbabwean, Cameroonian, Asian, Ghanaian, and Irish voices.



Stand Up for Diversity Sudbury

We organised an evening of three-minute mini-talks and short shout-outs hosted by Gainsborough's House, supported by Sudbury Arts Centre and Quay Theatre. The event was part of a day of activities supporting artists working in diversity and discussing creative health, with an Artist Salon earlier in the day.



Stand Up for Diversity Shoeburyness

Our Spring event took place at the Cart and Wagon Shed in Shoeburyness, in partnership with Shoebury Coastal CIC. After a guided heritage walking tour, speakers gave short talks exploring heritage, community and hospitality, and how those in the area are working to capture, celebrate and preserve stories of people and place for future generations.

Productive Partnerships

Partnership is at the heart of Essex Cultural Diversity Project’s work, and we value strong alliances and collaborative working to celebrate and energise diversity in the East of England. Here are some examples of productive partnerships this year, which have enhanced our work alongside our core programmes, helped us reach more audiences, and further established our position as a lead player in arts and diversity in the Eastern region.



International Collaborations: From Essex to Amritsar

As a legacy of our project, *After the Partition* we took the work of Essex based artist Suman Gujral to the Partition Museum in Amritsar, India. At the centre of Suman’s practice is the exploration of Indian history, in particular Partition when India was divided and many communities displaced. The artist explores the effect this had on her own family, and more broadly on India itself. She is interested in how the cycle of displacement and division of families is still happening today in places all around the world.



EAFN25: Sharing our Knowledge

As part of our *Global Village* Development Programme, we have been researching into the events sector in Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire, exploring challenges and opportunities currently facing festivals in the East of England. We were invited by the East Anglian Festival Network to be part in their annual conference in Cambridgeshire, taking part in a panel discussion alongside other festival experts.

There was a good discussion on the challenges around funding and financial sustainability, as well as opportunities to promote the importance of the festival sector in relation to changes coming to local government and devolution. We were able to share our insights into organising collaborative and partnership-focused diverse festivals and events, and the importance of hyper-local relationships with key organisations such as local authorities.

Evaluating Platforma: Sharing our Skills

We worked with Counterpoints Arts to create and facilitate the evaluation of their recent *Platforma Festival*. We led a Reflection Meeting with artists from the East of England, to help enable participating event organisers to spend time looking back at their events, to share insights, and gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of their peers. The festival commissions and overall programme were evaluated with a view to build long-term capacity and create collaborations that will last well beyond the festival period.

Pop Up Exhibitions

We are building our bank of pop-up exhibitions that can tour the East of England, as a valuable educational resource and a legacy for past projects. Each year we find hosts for our exhibitions to keep these crucial conversations about diversity and inclusion in the public eye.

The Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Gravesend showed our exhibition on Sophia Duleep Singh from International Women’s Day through to May.

Libraries in and around Brentwood hosted our pop-up exhibition *An Indian Princess in Essex* as part of the Brentwood International Cultural Festival. This exhibition tells the hidden story of Princess Helen Runder Singh Alhuwalia of Karpurthla, who is buried in Doddinghurst.

Our *After the Partition: A Shared Cultural Heritage* exhibition also toured across venues this year, sharing personal stories and experiences of those who travelled from the Punjab to the UK and settled in Essex. The pop-up was shown at Hampton’s Leisure Centre and Meadows Shopping Centre for Chelmsford Heritage Open Days, finishing the year at the Partition Museum in Amritsar, India.



Supporting Creatives in East Anglia

The recent uplift in funding as part of our National Portfolio Organisation programme, funded by Arts Council England, has given us the opportunity to explore new opportunities and make connections with communities, local authorities, and arts and cultural organisations in Norfolk and Suffolk.

This year twelve arts and community organisations and creative practitioners were supported, with projects ranging from theatre and opera tours, to visual art exhibitions with participatory workshops for groups focussing on gender and cultural heritage. Support was also provided to those delivering socially engaged arts projects in Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire spanning dance, music, visual arts and theatre. Advice was given for funding and best practice in community engagement, including reviewing funding applications and making introductions for partner development.

Notable projects included *Sophia* by Hannah Kumari, Eastern Angles’ two-month touring production with over 30 dates; Maria Pavledis’ participatory art project with single mothers at Gressenhall Museum and an exhibition of works entitled *Fallen - The Jacket Women of Gressenhall Workhouse* (pictured above); Ashton Owen’s *For the Benefit of Pablo Fanque* children’s theatre touring project; Sunya Company’s *Goodnight Maharajah* performances; and our participation in the steering group for Lora Aziz’s *Blue Steps Project*.

This year we also supported the latest tour of Anna Mudeka’s show *Mama Afrika*, celebrating the life and work of Dr Miriam Makeba, which toured to Colchester Arts Centre, King’s Lynn, Norwich and Bury St Edmunds, alongside dates around the UK.



Financial Overview

Essex Cultural Diversity Project celebrated its eighth year as an Arts Council England National Portfolio organisation (NPO), providing a financially secure base on which we can further develop resources, fundraise, and continue to support diverse creative practitioners and communities through ambitious programmes.

In 2025/26 funding from Arts Council England was 64% of our total income of £355,327, thanks to a 1.6% uplift in NPO funding for 25/26.

We have also been successful in raising income through local authority grants, showing that we are being recognised for the significant role we can play in supporting local communities, fostering pride in place, and uplifting local business, infrastructure and skills. This includes substantial core support from Essex County Council; contributions from Norfolk County Council, Breckland Council and Thetford Council for the *Festival of Thetford & Punjab*, and support from Rochford District Council for our *Global Village* programme funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Our commissioning programme continues to attract partnership match funding from those wishing to co-host projects and invest in our work, with match funding this year from the National Trust and Start Thurrock. We also received partner contributions to lay the foundations for some of next year’s commission programme, most notably from Colchester and Ipswich Museums for a tea-themed commission, and from the National Trust for its Constable celebrations in Flatford.

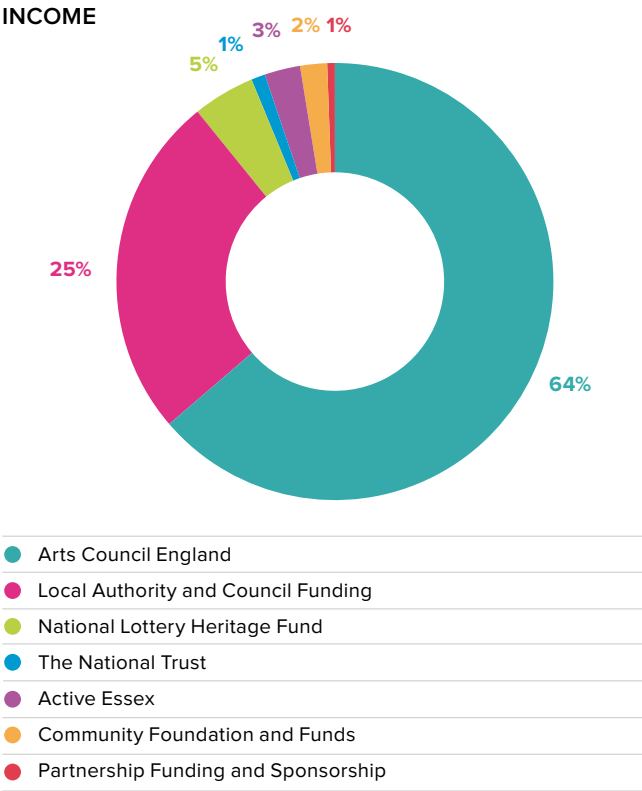
Our Creative Health Programme is an area we are continuing to expand and develop funding streams, supported this year by project grants from Active Essex and Essex Community Foundation.

This year, we continued our research around one of our main assets, *Global Village*, our scalable festival event which has the potential to generate income to ensure the organisation’s sustainability in an increasingly difficult public funding climate.

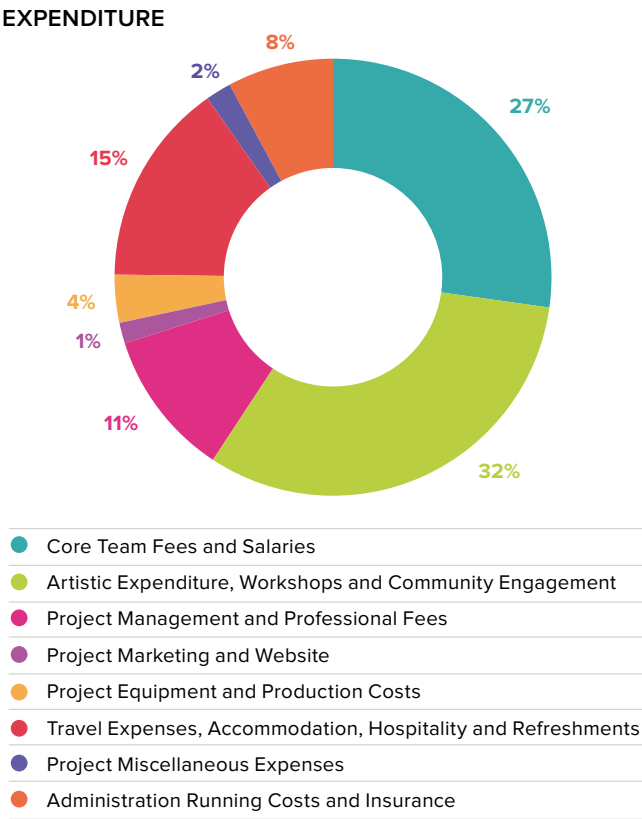
As we continue to work across different counties including Suffolk and Norfolk, ECDP is looking to the future to expand our activity plans and funding opportunities.

ECDP maintained its general reserves throughout 2025/26 to ensure that the organisation can cover three months of operational costs if necessary and has contingency to support project work and further investment.

INCOME



EXPENDITURE





Looking Forward to 2026/27

Indi Sandhu, Creative Director and CEO

Planning for the year ahead is now underway. The team is busy programming projects, commissions, festivals and events for the East of England, as we enter our ninth year as an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.

We'll be partnering with the National Trust for the eighth year running, with a creative commission at Flatford to celebrate the 250th anniversary of John Constable's birth. We are working with Colchester & Ipswich Museums, sharing stories of migration on the theme of tea to develop museum resources for schools and visitors. Other commissions are in the pipeline for Shoeburyness and Vange in Basildon.

The *Festival of Thetford & Punjab* 2026 will be even bigger and better this year, celebrating the town through local, national and international perspectives. We are delighted to be working in partnership with Arts La'Olam, co-hosting a commission and a series of workshops to capture cross-cultural stories of Thetford in collaboration with the local community, engaging residents in the run up to the festival.

Global Village will be touring the region, with a special procession in Chelmsford to welcome the Women's International T20 Cricket India vs England Match. We also have plans for events in Sudbury and Rainham, bringing together people to energise diversity and foster cultural exchange.

One of our core aims is to support sector development, and we understand how important local context is to this. We'll be supporting creative practitioners and nurturing talent across Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk with a new programme of Salons, and taking *Stand Up for Diversity* events to Clacton, Chelmsford and Felixstowe.

We are strengthening our creative health work to deliver four six-week programmes across Essex, realising the potential of our work to support good health and deliver positive social outcomes.

We are continuing to grow our international partnerships both at home and abroad; we are one of the key partners bringing the *Chinese Story Exhibition* to Harwich, and we will be attending the touring annual worldwide music expo *Womex 2026* in Spain, to develop our cultural programming for festivals and events.

Overall 2026/27 will bring new opportunities for us to focus on supporting cultural and heritage development across the region, building new partnerships, exploring positive stories and experiences through times of change, and working with our core partners and funders Arts Council England and Essex County Council.

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Special thanks to
OUR CORE TEAM: Indi Sandhu, Creative Director and CEO | Nicky Bettell, Finance Administrator | Daisy Lees, Community Engagement Lead | Sean McLoughlin, Global Village Lead | Jo Nancarrow, Digital & Admin Lead | Giles Tofield, Strategic Lead

OUR TRUSTEES: Jaymini Nakum | David Guy (Treasurer) | Nita Jhummu | Enitan Kane | Kerith Ririe | Miriam Stead (Chair) | Joanne Webb (Secretary) | James Wenn | Simone Xue

ECDP Patrons: The Singh Twins
Patron for Festival of Thetford & Punjab: Dr Satinder Sartaaj

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Image Credit: Front Page - Thetford Mela 2025. Back page -
Witham & I, Dulce Duca at Witham Street Entertainment Festival

“Having experienced first-hand and also benefiting from the invaluable work that Essex Cultural Diversity Project does in cultivating racial equality and intercultural understanding through arts, heritage and culture, we are delighted and honoured to have been invited to be Patrons. In our own practice as artists, we share many of the ECDP’s values and aims and are very much looking forward to lending our support”

— The Singh Twins, ECDP Patrons

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