CoSTAR
THE UK R&D NETWORK FOR CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY
NationalLAB

CoSTAR NATIONAL LAB ANNUAL REPORT

OCTOBER 2023 - DECEMBER 2025

NFTS NATIONAL FILM AND TELEVISION SCHOOL
Abertay University
UNIVERSITY OF SURREY
ROYAL HOLLOWAY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
DISGUISE
PINEWOOD
BT
UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council

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Directors' Statement

CoSTAR represents a step change in the UK's investment in Creative Industries R&D. The last decade has seen a significant increase in support for creative R&D on a project basis. CoSTAR takes the next step, developing an evergreen infrastructure. Through the CoSTAR Network, we are building the long-term infrastructure required to support sustained growth, productivity and global competitiveness across the convergent screen and performance sectors.

Since the CoSTAR investment was announced, we have established the CoSTAR National Lab as a central gateway into this distributed national infrastructure — connecting specialist R&D Labs across the UK, including the Live Lab, Realtime Lab, Screen Lab and Foresight Lab. Together, the Network provides creative businesses with access to a unique combination of facilities, research expertise and technical capability designed to meet the rapidly evolving needs of the sector. Already, 79 companies have directly benefited from CoSTAR Network Activity, even before all physical and virtual facilities are fully operational.

While creative industries infrastructure has distinctive characteristics — including the increasing dependence on creative technologies, software and workflows with a permissive approach to intellectual property — CoSTAR sits alongside other major UKRI and government infrastructure investments. As with these programmes, value is realised over time through sustained use, partnership and iteration, as the facilities, tools and capabilities mature.

Over the past two years, our focus has been on establishing the foundations for a future-facing national capability. This includes the development of the CoSTAR Stage and National Lab facilities at Pinewood Studios, expansion of AI compute infrastructure, and the rollout of distributed technical capability and Access Programmes across the Network. Throughout 2023-2025, CoSTAR has become operational as a nationally accessible infrastructure supporting experimentation, prototyping and SME engagement across the UK.

Inclusion, sustainability and responsible innovation underpin our approach. We are committed to ensuring that companies engaging with CoSTAR benefit from practical support, skills development and guidance that embed inclusive and sustainable practice from early-stage R&D through to commercial deployment.

In doing so, the Network is helping to shape an innovation ecosystem that is not only globally competitive, but also ethical, accessible and future facing, designed to build on the UK's existing creative industries strengths. As Sir Peter Bazalgette has observed, the UK has a "worldwide reputation for compelling video games, music, TV and film, radio and podcasts. We don't make much of the globe's hardware, but we're the creators of much of the software that runs on it."[1]

This report covers the period from launch in 2023 through to the end of 2025, marking CoSTAR's transition from establishment into early delivery and national scaling.

Looking ahead, 2026 will be a pivotal year for CoSTAR National Lab. The opening of the CoSTAR Stage at Pinewood, expanded AI compute capacity, an 'always-on' Enterprise and Commercialisation offer, and new strategic partnerships will further strengthen the UK's national creative R&D infrastructure and help position the UK as a global leader in convergent creative technologies.

James Bennett, Sarah Smyth, Ade Woolard

1 UK Council for Science & Technology (2023), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652fc7ac92895c0010dcb980/Harnessing_Research_and_Development_in_the_UK_Creative_Industries.pdf

Section 1: Introduction

What is CoSTAR?

Convergent Screen Technologies and Performance in Realtime (CoSTAR) is a £75.6 million investment from the UKRI Infrastructure Fund, delivered by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). CoSTAR establishes the UK's first national network of research and development (R&D) Labs for the Creative Industries, forming part of the UK's long-term research infrastructure to support innovation-led growth in one of the country's most economically and culturally significant sectors.

The CoSTAR Network provides world-leading facilities, creative technology research and academic–industry partnerships to drive productivity, skills development and SME competitiveness across gaming, television, film, performance and digital entertainment. By lowering barriers to R&D and access to advanced infrastructure, CoSTAR supports the development, exploitation and commercialisation of UK creative intellectual property (IP).

The CoSTAR National Lab (CSNL) is one of the core delivery hubs within the CoSTAR Network, providing coordinated access to its distributed infrastructure, facilities and expertise across the UK. Led by Royal Holloway, University of London, in partnership with the National Film & Television School, the University of Surrey, Abertay University, Pinewood Studios, Disguise and BT, the National Lab brings together public investment, academic excellence and industry capability to deliver long-term value for the sector. The flagship CoSTAR Stage and Lab facilities at Pinewood Studios will open in 2026, embedding R&D at the heart of the UK's globally recognised centre for screen production.

Section 1: Introduction

CoSTAR National Lab is part of a national R&D infrastructure with a UK-wide footprint, delivered through a coordinated 'network' of specialist labs and partners. Its distributed model enables broad national access to facilities, expertise and innovation programmes, while leveraging the strengths of established regional production centres and research institutions. It consists of the following R&D Labs, each with its own research specialists, technical facilities and expert researchers:

- **Live Lab** is a UK hub for developing new technology that makes live performance more immersive, flexible, and impactful, led by the University of York and based in Production Park, Wakefield.
- **Realtime Lab** is a community of world-leading experts and industry pioneers exploring what's next in virtual production and real-time tech and gaming, based in Scotland and led by Abertay University.
- **Screen Lab** is a facility for film, TV, gaming, and digital entertainment creators, focused on using technology to open up new ways of telling your stories, based at Studio Ulster in Belfast and led by Ulster University.
- **Foresight Lab** is a community of industry leading researchers, policy experts and data analysts working to understand how new tech is shaping games, film, TV, performance, and digital entertainment led by Goldsmiths, University of London.

Why is CoSTAR Important?

The CoSTAR Network can be seen as the culmination of the first wave of investment in Creative Industries R&D that included Audience of the Future Challenge (2018-2022) and the Creative Industries Clusters Programme (2018-2023); CoSTAR represents a move from project and programme to infrastructure funding and the National Lab is the largest single investment made by UKRI in the sector to date.

The identification of the Creative Industries as one of the eight sectors of the UK with the highest potential for growth in the UK Governments New Industrial Strategy (2025)[2], the associated Creative Industries Sector Plan[3] and the subsequent announcement of UKRI's unprecedented £369m allocation to research and innovation in the Creative Industries[4] provide a very positive environment for the CoSTAR National Lab to deliver its mission and for the Network to achieve a wide range of sector and policy objectives:

The New Industrial Strategy is designed to accelerate innovation and drive productivity. The Creative Industries Sector Plan has identified three industrial sectors served by CoSTAR (Film and TV, Video Games, Music and Performing Arts) as the Frontier Industries delivering that innovation. A fourth frontier sector, Advertising and Marketing, suggests a new set of industry partnerships for CoSTAR to develop.

2 UK Government CP1451 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69256e16367485ea116a56de/industrial_strategy_policy_paper.pdf

3 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68920e22dc6688ed50878479/industrial_strategy_creative_industries_sector_plan_accessible.pdf

4 https://www.ukri.org/publications/explainer-ukri-budget-allocations/budget-allocations-for-uk-research-and-innovation/

Section 1: Introduction

The Sector Plan seeks to maximise the potential of Creative Technologies (Createch) including AI. The CoSTAR National Lab and partners across the Network provide the applied research capacity, industrial partnership, agile and accessible facilities (from converged media production to AI/compute) to underpin this. CoSTAR's centrality to the Sector Plan is specifically recognised in the DCMS Createch Futures Programme, a £25m commitment to enhance and expand the Network.

The technically capable and industry oriented national infrastructure and research capability provided by CoSTAR will also act as a backbone to support other objectives and programmes within the Industrial Strategy and Sector Plan:

- **Creative Industries Clusters Programme (CICP)** and **Creative Places Growth Fund (CPGF)** – as a national infrastructure CoSTAR can provide specialist facilities, technology expertise and innovation capabilities to these place-based programmes. As Chair of the CoSTAR Network, the National Lab can work with localised growth programmes to access and/or expand the infrastructure, avoiding duplication and achieving maximal return on public investment.
- **Creative Content Exchange (CCE)** – CoSTAR National Lab can provide expert concept development, creative innovation expertise, piloting and prototyping services for the UK Government's planned "trusted marketplace for selling, buying, licensing and allowing access to digitised cultural and creative assets". The powerful case study of the ACCCT framework below, demonstrates CSNL's convening and concept development capabilities relevant to CEC's objectives.

CoSTAR is a strategic UK research infrastructure investment aligned with UKRI and DCMS priorities for the Creative Industries.

It supports:

- **Creative Industries growth and productivity, strengthening the UK's capacity to develop and commercialise creative IP.**
- **SME-led innovation, lowering barriers to R&D, skills and advanced infrastructure.**
- **Place-based investment, building capability across regional creative clusters while enabling national collaboration.**
- **Responsible adoption of emerging technologies, including AI and real-time production, through inclusive and sustainable approaches.**
- **Programmes across the Creative Industries Sector Plan with infrastructure that can be leveraged to increase business R&D including the Creative Industries Clusters Programme, Creative Places Growth Fund and the proposed Creative Content Exchange.**

Through this alignment, CoSTAR directly supports the ambitions of the UK's Creative Industries policy agenda, helping to secure long-term global competitiveness and resilience.

Programme Grant Reference: AH/Y001060/1

Section 2: Summary of Progress

Executive Summary

The goal of CoSTAR is to provide UK creative companies with access to today's cutting-edge technologies and research expertise and turn their ideas into real-world innovation, commercial growth and long-term global competitiveness for the UK's creative economy.

Since launch, 182 companies have applied to engage with the CoSTAR National Lab and Network-wide Access Programmes, marking the first year of operation of the UK's first Creative Industries National Infrastructure. By the end of 2025, 79 companies had accessed and worked with the CoSTAR Network through the CoSTAR National Lab, including 23 companies graduating from the inaugural Enterprise and Commercialisation (E&C) programme, Ideate.

CoSTAR National Lab has secured more than £15.2m in additional co-investment from industry and other public funding bodies. This increases the impact of the original funding and helps ensure the long-term viability of the CoSTAR National Lab programme. Several new partnerships are expected to be announced in 2026, which would significantly increase the level of co-investment further.

In parallel, the team has worked extensively to roll out CoSTAR's technical infrastructure — from private 5G networks across each CoSTAR facility to a pilot AI Compute capability for industry collaboration. Work has also progressed through the design, procurement, contracting and planning phases for the Pinewood Studios facility, which will provide the physical base for Applied Research from autumn 2026. Alongside this, the full AI Compute infrastructure to support Access Programmes will be available from Summer 2026.

Together, these early achievements demonstrate how CoSTAR is delivering a nationally significant creative R&D capability that will strengthen UK competitiveness, accelerate innovation-led growth, and support SMEs to adopt emerging technologies responsibly in line with UKRI and DCMS strategic priorities.

The rest of this section provides a snapshot of the CoSTAR National Lab's progress against its KPIs so far. These measures reflect our core objectives: lowering barriers to R&D and advanced technologies for creative businesses, building capability and skills, supporting the creation and commercialisation of new IP and businesses and supporting sustainable business growth across the sector.

Data is collected through a combination of structured surveys with companies engaging in our Access Programmes and facilities, administered at contracting and programme exit stages, alongside operational records and digital analytics. Longer-term impacts will be captured through annual follow-up surveys with participating companies for up to three years post-engagement, commencing as cohorts progress beyond their initial involvement.

Marketing reach and engagement are tracked using Google Analytics and campaign reporting, while co-investment is recorded through programme-level monitoring of additional financial and in-kind contributions secured alongside CoSTAR activity. Taken together, these data sources provide an early but robust indication of CoSTAR's performance against its targets, while recognising that some indicators will continue to mature as delivery progresses.

Section 2: Summary of Progress

Infrastructure Access and Incubation

As an infrastructure-led programme, a core objective for CoSTAR is the delivery of a state-of-the-art National Lab at Pinewood Studios, which will open in 2026 as a major hub for creative industries R&D. In parallel, the Futures Studio at Royal Holloway has ensured that access to infrastructure has been available from the outset, enabling companies to undertake hands-on experimentation, prototyping and early-stage innovation within a fully operational interim environment. Alongside this physical provision, CoSTAR has also begun rolling out key digital infrastructure, including the pilot phase of the National Lab's AI Compute platform in Spring 2025, providing creative businesses with access to the advanced computational resources needed for data-intensive R&D.

Feedback from industry to date has been highly positive, reflecting strong demand for the facilities, equipment and technical support already in place, and demonstrating clear momentum ahead of the full CSNL launch at Pinewood Studios.

KPI Highlights

Access Programme users completing Environmental Sustainability Training*

18

Access Programme users completing Equity & Diversity training*

14

Number of Companies supported

29

National Lab Industry Reach Across Digital Channels

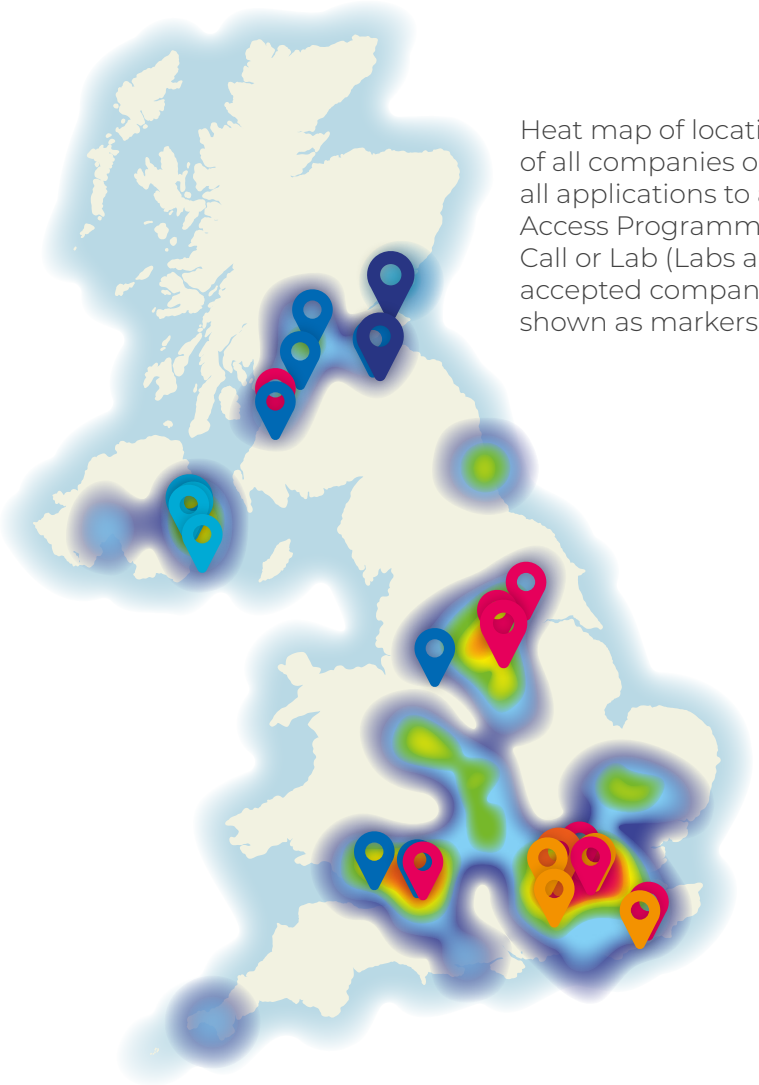
4936

Total Additional Co-Investment since Launch

£15.2m

** Knowledge Exchange programmes still in progress across Access Programmes so we expect an increase in those numbers going forward.*

Section 2: Summary of Progress



Heat map of location of all companies on all applications to any Access Programme Call or Lab (Labs and accepted companies shown as markers)

Regional Breakdown of Access Programme Users

East Anglia	3.0%
East Midlands	2.0%
London	34.0%
North East	3.0%
North West	8.0%
Northern Ireland	8.0%
Scotland	7.0%
South East	13.0%
South West	8.0%
Wales	3.0%
West Midlands	6.0%
Yorkshire and Humber	5.0%
Total outside London & SE	**53%**

Why This Matters

These early results demonstrate that the CoSTAR Labs are already operating as a coordinated national R&D infrastructure, connecting companies across the UK to shared facilities, expertise and innovation capability. This approach is strengthening industry engagement, attracting partner investment, and establishing strong foundations for expanded access and impact as new infrastructure (such as the National Lab at Pinewood and the AI Compute Cluster) comes online in 2026.

Section 3: Building National R&D Infrastructure

The CoSTAR National Lab is much more than bricks and mortar. The CoSTAR Lab will provide a physical base for activity from autumn 2026, including a unique Converged Media Studio and AI capability located on the iconic lot at Pinewood Studios. A studio alone, however, would not fulfil the National Lab's remit to build, strengthen and deepen the UK's creative technology ecosystem.

Building a R&D Lab for screen and performance is therefore about offering the sector a clear value-add beyond the many sound stages already operating across the UK. CoSTAR is being developed explicitly as a Lab for R&D, designed to drive earlier adoption of innovative capabilities and to support experimentation, collaboration and learning.

R&D Infrastructure

Our approach to infrastructure spans three interconnected dimensions:

1. **Infrastructure as facilities and specialist kit.**
2. **Infrastructure as digital capabilities – software, datasets, tools, workflows and pipelines.**
3. **Infrastructure as knowledge and expertise – people, research, innovation and operations.**

Viewed through this lens, facilities and specialist kit are enabled by digital capabilities and underpinned by knowledge and expertise, in a continuous and iterative cycle. The National Lab is therefore designed to evolve over time, responding to technological change and sector need. It also represents a uniquely UKRI AHRC intervention in the creative economy supporting the importance of the Creative Industries in the latest UK Industrial Strategy Sector Plan.[5]

CoSTAR's infrastructure extends well beyond the walls of the Studio, making the National Lab a nationally accessible resource distributed across the UK. This includes:

- **Installation of private 5G networks (P5GN) at each R&D Production Lab — from Belfast to Wakefield, Dundee to Pinewood — providing localised, dedicated cellular networks with high-speed, secure and low-latency connectivity.**
- **The build and deployment of a high-performance AI compute cluster comprising approximately 100 GPUs, supporting industrial and research stakeholders to develop and train multi-modal AI foundation models and other data-intensive machine learning workflows.**
- **Provision of a wide range of emerging technologies and tools relevant to creative industries workflows, including inclusive marker less motion capture systems and generative AI pipelines for creative production.**
- **Access Programmes offering Prototyping and Pilot project opportunities, alongside Enterprise and Commercialisation support for companies at different stages of growth.**
- **'Futures' Research Programmes spanning Creative AI, CreaTech, Inclusion, Users, and Creative and Business innovation.**

5 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-sector-plans/sector-plans

Section 3: Building National R&D Infrastructure

CoSTAR National Lab at Pinewood Studios

The CoSTAR National Lab at Pinewood Studios will include a state-of-the-art Converged Media Production Stage, providing a highly flexible R&D environment for the UK's Creative Industries. The Stage will be a collaborative space where academic researchers and industry partners can test, trial and refine new approaches to media production across film, television, live performance, immersive media and gaming.

A core objective is to de-risk experimentation and accelerate innovation in converged media by reducing technical and commercial barriers for creative businesses. The studio environment has been designed to be modular and reconfigurable, supporting different production formats and creative applications within the same space, and enabling iterative R&D as technologies and sector needs evolve.

Following a public procurement process, a major UK CreaTech company has been appointed as the principal technology partner, responsible for the design, supply and support of key systems. The Stage will also function as an industry-facing demonstration and testing environment, strengthening collaboration between academia and the creative technology sector and supporting iterative development of commercial applications.

Summary of CoSTAR Lab Technologies:

- Visual display: LED and projection systems for flexible, reconfigurable environments.
- Rigging and infrastructure: trussing and motorised rigging to support rapid studio reconfiguration.
- Spatial audio: integrated capabilities for immersive production and performance workflows.
- Tracking and monitoring: camera and motion tracking plus system monitoring for R&D-grade testing.
- IP media network: a next-generation ST-2110 backbone enabling entirely IP-based transport of video, audio and timing signals.
- Real-time control: Disguise systems supporting real-time outputs to the LED and projector environment, with high-bandwidth networking to capture multiple video and audio streams simultaneously.

Recognising the pace of technological change, the facility has clear upgrade and refresh pathways to ensure it remains at the forefront of converged media innovation through 2026–2029 and beyond.

CoSTAR National Lab AI Compute

CSNL is developing the provision of AI compute infrastructure to support creative AI research and development with industry partners and CoSTAR Network Labs. The AI compute platform will allow companies and researchers to train and test advanced AI models on the large audio-visual datasets common in film, games and performance production. The system combines powerful GPU servers with ultra-fast storage, providing the capacity needed for data-intensive creative AI research and development.

The infrastructure is being delivered in three phases. Phase 1 (Pilot) was successfully deployed in January 2025, providing an initial cluster of GPU-enabled servers integrated with high-performance storage. This early capability has already supported pilot collaboration with industry partners, enabling benchmarking and experimentation with state-of-the-art multi-modal AI models and intelligent audio-visual processing tools (see AI Case Study below).

Phase 2 (Full) is now at an advanced stage of procurement and installation. The expanded system is expected to be operational for CSNL testing from April 2026, with access opening to industry and network partners from summer 2026. Phase 2 will significantly increase capacity, supporting a wider range of creative industries collaborators in training and testing AI models on both open and proprietary media datasets.

Further expansion and refresh of the AI compute infrastructure is planned from 2028, subject to demand and future requirements for increased performance and scale.

The platform will provide:

- Pilot capability (already operational): an initial cluster supporting early-stage industry and research collaboration.
- Full-scale capability (summer 2026): a major expansion delivering over 100 high-performance NVIDIA H200 GPUs, alongside 750TB of ultra-fast storage to support large-scale AI training workloads.

Section 3: Building National R&D Infrastructure

AI Case Study: SAIRECO LTD

The Company
SAIReco pioneers socially responsible AI for real-time video transformation, developing tools that generate rich contextual video understanding, accessibility-ready outputs and narrative scene descriptions.

The Project
Through CoSTAR Ideate, SAIReco accessed the National Lab's AI Compute infrastructure to refine its MVP, establish a synthetic data pipeline and fine-tune customised models essential for scalability.

Outcomes to Date
The company completed structured mentoring and accelerator support, including team capability gap analysis and financial forecasting for growth. SAIReco has since been shortlisted for Best Innovation in Accessible Tech at the Tech Impact Awards 2025.

Next Steps
SAIReco is expanding its market presence through pilot programmes and strategic partner engagement for wider distribution.

Why CoSTAR?
Founder Asmar Nadeem said: *"Without CoSTAR, SAIReco would not have been able to identify the critical gaps in our team, access the compute resources to perfect our synthetic data pipeline, or fine-tune the custom models essential for our product. CoSTAR gave us an environment to validate market needs, strategise client acquisition, and translate our technical capabilities into a scalable business approach."*

Private 5G Networks

Dedicated private 5G networks (P5GN) have been installed at each CoSTAR Lab, providing teams with fast, secure wireless connectivity designed to support creative experimentation. P5GN enables reliable, low-latency performance even within complex studio environments populated by multiple IoT devices, including cameras, sensors and other production equipment.

In addition, as part of our CreaTech research theme, tools are being developed to enable compute-intensive tasks to be distributed to the network edge over 5G. These capabilities will be increasingly important for AI-assisted XR, and other demanding AI-enabled production workflows anticipated across the sector in the coming years.

5G Case Study: NETWORK COLLABORATION WITH SCREEN LAB

The Company / Partners
HoloEdge Digital and RETìníZE were appointed as CoSTAR's first industry partners to develop innovative 5G use cases at Screen Lab, supported through BT's partnership with the National Lab.

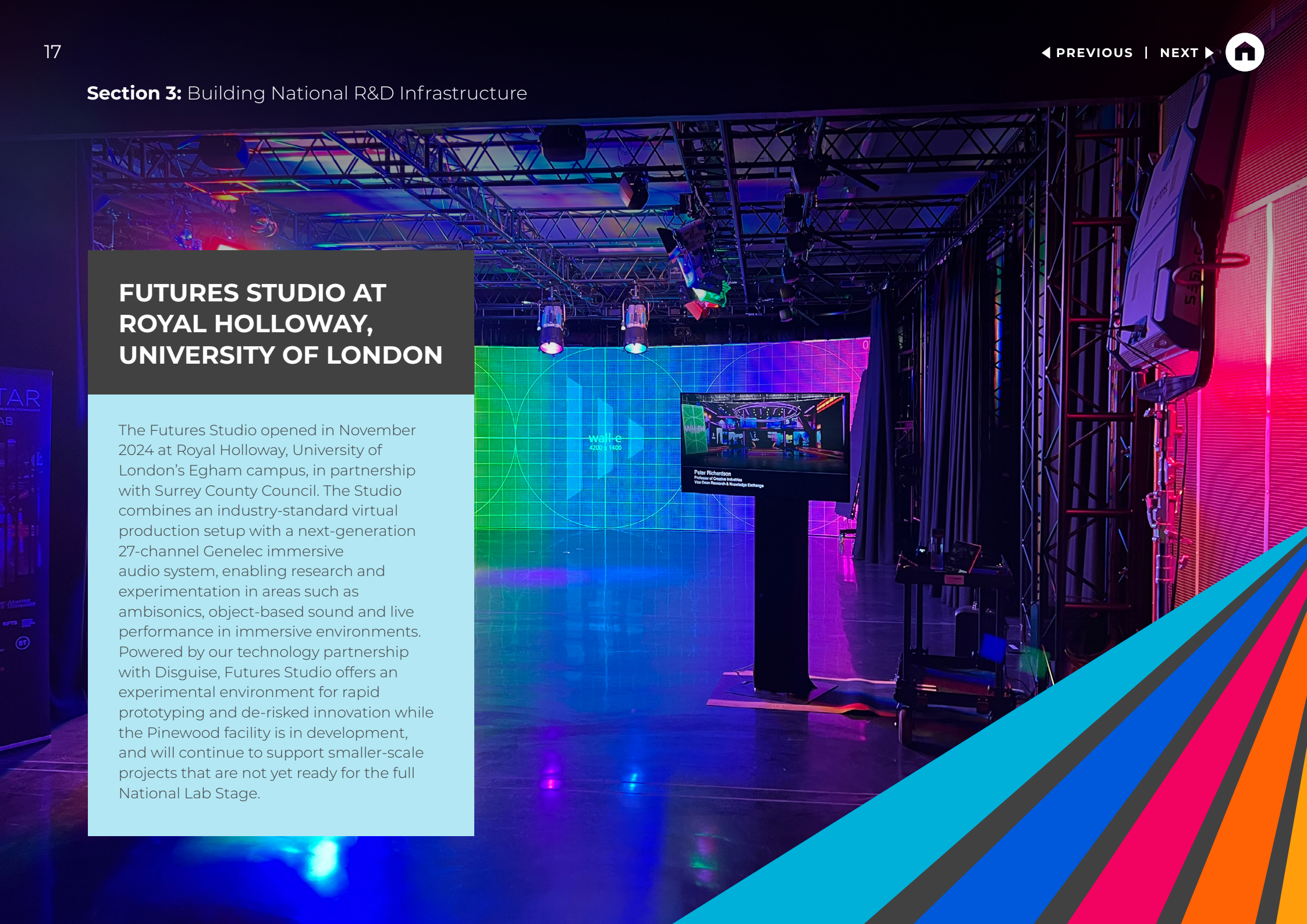
The Project
CoSTAR launched its first 5G Prototypes and Pilots Programme Call in May 2025, attracting 22 company applications. Each selected project received a support package valued at over £150,000, including up to £35,000 in cash funding.

Outcomes to Date

- HoloEdge collaborated with English National Opera to pilot live immersive distribution of opera via XR platforms, broadcasting Carmen rehearsals into Screen Lab's LED volume in Belfast.
- RETìníZE demonstrated distributed motion capture workflows by networking live Vicon data between Dundee and Belfast, enabling remote performers and directors to collaborate in real time.

Next Steps
These pilots provide an early foundation for scaling distributed production workflows across the Network as 5G infrastructure matures.

Why CoSTAR?
Professor Declan Keeney noted: *"Both projects demonstrate how 5G can unlock new creative opportunities — from expanding access to live cultural experiences, to enabling collaborative production across geographies."*



FUTURES STUDIO AT ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The Futures Studio opened in November 2024 at Royal Holloway, University of London's Egham campus, in partnership with Surrey County Council. The Studio combines an industry-standard virtual production setup with a next-generation 27-channel Genelec immersive audio system, enabling research and experimentation in areas such as ambisonics, object-based sound and live performance in immersive environments. Powered by our technology partnership with Disguise, Futures Studio offers an experimental environment for rapid prototyping and de-risked innovation while the Pinewood facility is in development, and will continue to support smaller-scale projects that are not yet ready for the full National Lab Stage.

Studio Case Study:
IMMERSIV.ES GROUP

The Company
Immersiv.es Group is reimagining live event engagement through the Immersive Ticket — a personalised digital companion enhancing audience experience before, during and after events.

The Project
As part of Ideate, the company used access to the Futures Studio to prototype smart ticketing workflows, test user journeys and develop an AR activation for Ode Islands at the Edinburgh Fringe.

Outcomes to Date
The pilot demonstrated new forms of interactive audience connection and validated technical direction through experimentation with motion capture and virtual production tools.

Next Steps
Immersiv.es is now moving into fuller development, refining its CMS and AI personalisation, while building an investor and pilot pipeline for 2026.

Why CoSTAR?
"CoSTAR gave us an environment to experiment with cutting-edge tools, test new workflows and collaborate with technical specialists and mentors. Without the Futures Studio we would not have been able to spread our creative wings so broadly. We had the opportunity to engage in motion capture recording, virtual production studio work, and validate our technical direction. Ode Islands became a success at this year's Fringe, selling out and receiving strong reviews, including four stars in The Guardian."

Why This Matters
By combining physical facilities, digital capability and research expertise into a nationally accessible infrastructure, CoSTAR is positioning the UK to remain globally competitive in convergent media innovation —reducing barriers for SMEs, accelerating responsible technology adoption, and maximising the long-term impact of public investment in the Creative Industries.

Section 4: Industry Access Programmes

The CoSTAR Industry Access Programmes provide opportunities for companies to benefit from CoSTAR infrastructure – broadly by either bringing their own IP and ideas to the Lab for support and access to facilities to execute projects, or accessing CoSTAR tools and technologies to develop against through the Lab's permissive IP approach.

Why Are We Investing in These Programmes?
Creative industry businesses have historically faced challenges in securing the investment required to grow and scale, in part due to investors' limited understanding of sector business models and the perceived risk of creative IP. Notably, **51% of creative businesses are perceived as risky by funders.** At the same time, the sector is dominated by small firms — **93% of creative industries organisations are micro businesses[6]** — and founders are often specialists in creative practice or technology rather than commercial growth. While R&D grants often support early-stage development, there is frequently limited provision for longer-term commercialisation and routes to market. Many businesses also report capability gaps, with 30% lacking the financial knowledge needed to make informed decisions[7].

Finally, access to technology infrastructure and finance are seen as key barriers: industry consultation with over 100 companies identified strong demand for studio space and specialist technical support[8], while high borrowing costs continue to deter early-stage SME growth, reinforcing demand for long-term, non-diluting finance[9].

The CoSTAR Access Programmes are structed in two broad programmes:

- **Enterprise and Commercialisation:** focused on supporting a company at various points in its growth cycle.
- **Prototypes and Pilots:** focused on helping companies experiment with new technologies within the confines of a specific project.

Enterprise & Commercialisation Overview

The CoSTAR Enterprise and Commercialisation (E&C) programme provides an entrepreneurial network supporting creative technology innovation across the UK's Creative Industries. Its strength lies in delivering business development and IP support co-located within CoSTAR infrastructure, giving companies direct access to specialist facilities, research and expertise.

Through workshops, masterclasses and structured programmes, E&C reduces barriers faced by creative businesses by supporting SMEs from start-up to scale-up and strengthening the UK's creative industries R&D and commercialisation ecosystem.

Programme Focus

- **Incubating high-potential IP, software, tools and services**, supporting the development of robust, scalable and inclusive businesses built on strong commercial foundations.
- **Accelerating the capacity and capability of UK businesses** with potential to scale innovative creative and technical solutions globally, helping build competitive advantage in emerging markets.
- **Unlocking investment into new IP and growth**, supporting access to the capital required for sustainable, long-term business expansion.
- **Connecting CoSTAR enterprises with leading technical, commercial and investment expertise**, enabling the development of world-leading creative technology IP, content, products and services.

6 UK Council for Science & Technology (2023), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/652fc7ac92895c0010dcb980/Harnessing_Research_and_Development_in_the_UK_Creative_Industries.pdf
7 https://unleash.wearecreative.uk
8 CoSTAR Industry Consultation (2024), n>100 companies.
9 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/creative-industries-sector-vision/creative-industries-sector-vision-a-joint-plan-to-drive-growth-build-talent-and-develop-skills

Section 4: Industry Access Programmes

E&C Programme Example: 2025 IDEATE PROGRAMME

CoSTAR Ideate supports the development of micro, start-ups and early-growth companies looking to scale new IP in the creative technology sector. Led by the CoSTAR National Lab and delivered in conjunction with the CoSTAR Network Labs, Ideate marries access to cutting-edge facilities, creative and technology expertise and world-leading research that is attuned to the unique growth stage(s) of creative enterprises.

Company Growth Target stage:
Early-stage companies and IP

Programme Data:

E&C Programme	Number of Applications Received	Number of Applications Shortlisted	Number of Successful Applicants
CoSTAR Ideate	Total: 52	Total: 28	23*
	National Lab: 16	8	
	Realtime Lab: 17	8	
	Live Lab: 9	6	
	Screen Lab: 8	6	

**24 companies were initially chosen for the Ideate programme, with 23 completing it*

Participant Companies:
AIX Live Ltd, BeingHuman, Bonnie and Braw Cartùns, CineRPG CIC, HoloEdge Digital Ltd, Imagine If. Space CIC, Immersiv.es Group, King Bee Animation, Ludo Dao CIC, Magnetic Lab Ltd, Maximalist Ltd, Fort Film, SAIReco Ltd, SEQO, The Innovation Collective, SUUM.studio Ltd, Sync Imaging, The Grey Hill, Velox XR Limited, Virtual Production Hub LTD, Volumetric Video Ltd, White Egg Ltd, Yellow Design.

Programme Features:

- A 5-month residency for 24 enterprises, 6 in each of the 4 CoSTAR Labs, including desk space and Lab space for participants on the programme.
- A low-risk route for company and product development through R&D time at CoSTAR Network facilities.
- Growth Lab business development sessions helping entrepreneurs to develop specific skills and strategies to benefit and accelerate their business growth plans.
- Access to technical support and resources at CoSTAR lab facilities and infrastructure, designed to ‘fill the gaps’ in IP and company development pipelines.
- Access to specialised expertise and research within the CoSTAR Network.
- 1-2-1 business growth, IP development and best practice in inclusive and sustainable innovation mentorship from UK sector experts that can tangibly help develop the business and IP further.

Ideate Company Profile: THE GREY HILL, CoSTAR LIVE LAB

The Company / Partners
The Grey Hill is supporting theatres to embrace digital transformation through tailored digital storefronts for audiobooks and eBooks. The platform helps venues generate new revenue streams, explore innovative production approaches, and enhance accessibility through live digital events and digital content distribution.

The Project
In 2025, The Grey Hill participated in CoSTAR's Ideate Enterprise and Commercialisation programme. Through access to CoSTAR Live Lab expertise and structured business support, the company accelerated the development of its digital innovation offer for the theatre sector.

Outcomes to Date
During Ideate, The Grey Hill developed a data analytics MVP designed to strengthen theatre production pipelines by providing valuable audience insight. This capability enables organisations to de-risk investment decisions, optimise touring strategies and expand audience reach. The company also benefited from weekly business training and targeted mentorship, helping strengthen commercial planning and organisational capability at a critical stage of growth.

Next Steps
The Grey Hill is now working with theatre and publishing partners across France and Scotland to build out its audiobook and eBook app. The company aims to launch with five initial clients and is continuing global business development engagement, with sector visits planned to Canada and Sweden in 2026.

Why CoSTAR?
Founder reflection: *"This opportunity has enabled me to develop a unique skillset within the theatre sector, focusing on sales, digital content creation, contracts and data. Without CoSTAR Ideate I wouldn't have gotten to this stage as fast."*

Section 4: Industry Access Programmes

Prototypes & Pilots Programme Overview

The Prototypes and Pilots Programme (PPP) provide a key access point for industry to test and apply emerging technologies through collaborative R&D using CoSTAR Network infrastructure. Acting as a pump-priming mechanism, it enables SMEs to engage with the UK's first national creative industries innovation infrastructure while strengthening their own internal R&D capability and developing new content and technology IP.

Through funded projects, specialist facilities and expert support, PPP creates a de-risked environment in which companies can experiment, build IP, and develop innovative products and services. This is particularly significant in the UK creative industries, which invest more in their own R&D than many other sectors while receiving comparatively less public research funding. PPP plays a catalytic role in leveraging additional R&D investment from both industry and the public sector — particularly through collaboration with academia — while demonstrating the long-term value of coordinated national infrastructure investment.

Programme Focus

- Providing creative industries SMEs with access to advanced technologies, facilities and expertise through the CoSTAR Network.
- Accelerating sector R&D and innovation adoption, enabling new technologies to be embedded across the screen and performance industries.
- Brokering collaborative R&D partnerships between industry and academia, strengthening the UK's creative technology ecosystem.
- Supporting creation and commercialisation of new IP, products and services, helping companies scale innovative solutions and contributing to long-term economic impact.
- Embedding responsible innovation principles, improving inclusion, workforce diversity and environmental sustainability across participating companies.

Demand for PPP opportunities has been significant from the outset. In 2025, **208 companies applied** demonstrating that sector demand for R&D access aligned to specialist infrastructure is already outstripping current capacity. The first five PPP calls attracted the following levels of interest:

Call 1 – CoSTAR Live Lab: New Frontiers in Live Performance – 61 applications.

Call 2 – CoSTAR Realtime Lab: Virtual Production Toolbox – 5 applications.

Call 3 – CoSTAR Screen Lab: 5G Innovation in Screen Technologies – 21 applications.

Call 4 – CoSTAR National Lab: Grassroots Music Venue Innovation – 42 applications.

Call 5 – CoSTAR National Lab: Advanced Production Technology – 79 applications.

As discussed in the Future section, the CoSTAR Network will move into a 'ramp-up' phase in 2026 to help service this growing demand, alongside continued expansion of infrastructure provision over the coming years.

PPP Programme Example:
FROM RESEARCH TO INNOVATION IN SUPPORT OF GRASSROOTS VENUES

The Challenge
Grassroots music venues hold significant cultural and economic value, providing shared live experiences and vital early-stage platforms for emerging artists. However, the Music Venue Trust reports that two grassroots venues are closing every month across the UK, highlighting the fragility of the sector and the need for practical, coordinated interventions.

The Project
Over 2024/25, CoSTAR National Lab undertook a major programme of research and consultation exploring how new and emerging technologies could support grassroots music venues and the communities that depend on them. This included 63 in-depth interviews with artists, venue operators, promoters, managers and creative practitioners, alongside a national workshop bringing together 23 stakeholders from across the UK.

The programme culminated in an R&D competition delivered with MusicFutures (a five-year UKRI Creative Cluster led by the University of Liverpool), inviting companies to rethink how live experiences can be created and shared through technology innovation.

Outcomes to Date
Four companies received **£40,000 in cash funding** plus **£100,000 of in-kind access** to CoSTAR facilities, MusicFutures infrastructure and R&D expertise. Studio-based innovation is now underway, with live pilots planned across venues in Bristol, Liverpool and London in Q1 2026.

Next Steps
These demonstrators will test new models for immersive audience connection, distributed performance formats and venue sustainability, helping explore more equitable futures for live music ecosystems.

Why CoSTAR?
This programme shows how national infrastructure-led R&D can translate sector challenge into practical innovation, supporting resilience and equitable growth within one of the UK's most culturally vital creative industries.

PPP Company Profile:
MEET THE COMPANIES SHORTLISTED FOR GRASSROOTS MUSIC CALL

1. **Megaverse** is an immersive studio specialising in real-time, interactive performance across film, theatre, gaming and live events. Their CoSTAR project looks at a portable performance system for venues that lets in-room and remote audiences influence what happens, amplifying the feedback loop between artists and audiences.
2. **MASS** is an immersive, collaborative club night that empowers creative visual and musical expression through interactive instruments and tools. It exists to counter disconnection by using technology as a catalyst for authentic interaction, dissolving boundaries between performers and audiences and fostering collective creativity.
3. **Sonalux Ltd** are designers and manufacturers of cutting-edge electronics that enhance the creativity of musicians, sound artists, performers, galleries, museums, concert rooms and AV technicians. Their project will make immersive sound possible within smaller venues not yet configured for Spatial Audio.
4. **Studio Tonto Ltd** is a creative technology studio formed by co-founders of the Liverpool-based venue Invisible Wind Factory (IWF). Their work includes designing and developing interactive installations that bridge experiential technology innovation with interaction and play. Their project prototypes a distributed live event format that enables grassroots venues to be linked and work collaboratively together on shared experiences in real time.

Why This Matters

By providing structured national routes into advanced facilities, expertise and applied R&D, CoSTAR's Access Programmes are strengthening the UK's creative technology ecosystem—helping SMEs innovate, scale and compete globally while maximising the long-term impact of public infrastructure investment.

Section 5: Applied Research - R&D Futures and Prototyping

Within the CoSTAR National Lab, we have established a set of R&D Futures Programmes: applied research and development focused on creative industry challenges and opportunities, embedding multidisciplinary practice at the heart of our national infrastructure. At CoSTAR, multidisciplinary practice brings together creative, technical, research and business expertise to develop new tools, content and workflows that can be applied in real production environments. By combining skills across screen, performance, computing and design, we accelerate innovation that no single discipline or organisation could achieve alone.

Together with our in-lab Prototyping Team and Industry Access Programmes, these Futures Programmes form a continuum of applied research — moving from early exploration through validation to real-world adoption and commercialisation. With a strong industry-aligned focus, the programmes accelerate innovation in areas where the market alone is unlikely to invest sufficiently, supporting high-potential work capable of delivering long-term value for the UK's Creative Industries[10].

They translate early-stage experimentation and industry challenge into practical tools, workflows and methods that can be adopted and commercialised, informed by technology advances in AI and CreaTech, creative opportunities across Screen and Performance sectors, business need, user insight and responsible innovation.

10 https://hbr.org/2013/10/special-forces-innovation-how-darpa-attacks-problems

Our Prototyping Team works alongside the Futures Programmes to accelerate research into applied use cases, inviting industry into the Lab (see Prototyping case study) and connecting deep research with emerging commercial opportunities. Insights from prototyping feed back into the research programmes, while validated outputs are shared and scaled through Industry Access Programmes (see Section 4), enabling companies to benefit from public innovation through permissive licensing, open-source release and structured commercialisation support.

CreaTech Futures

Challenge
CreaTech Futures develops advanced rendering and networking technologies that enable the creation of believable, reusable virtual worlds across a range of creative settings. The programme focuses on translating state-of-the-art research into practical tools, workflows and methods that industry can adopt and apply within real-world production environments.

Work to Date
Activity has focused on the development of an open-source, studio-ready toolkit designed to make advanced rendering and AI-enabled production more accessible (see Case Study later in this Section). The work is organised around two complementary strands: real-time rendering and networked rendering. Real-time research integrates volumetric visual effects, compositing, camera utilities and relightable scene representations for high-fidelity virtual production workflows. Networked rendering is developing an offloading framework using edge compute for rendering and AI workloads — a capability that will be increasingly important for next-generation AI-enabled production pipelines. The toolkit will be accompanied by an industry-facing technical paper to support adoption across film and television, XR, live events and broadcast.

R&D Futures Case Study: REALTIME CINEMATICS AND NETWORKED VIRTUAL PRODUCTION

Challenge
Emerging volumetric VFX and Gaussian splat rendering techniques offer new possibilities for immersive production, but current tools remain difficult to integrate into real-time studio workflows. Production environments require responsive, artist-controllable pipelines that enable believable cinematic experiences, dynamic lighting and compositing, and distributed production across physical and virtual settings.

The Project
CoSTAR prototyped a unified real-time pipeline combining volumetric VFX, Gaussian splat rendering and live compositing to support virtual production, XR and immersive performance. The work explores open-source, artist-controllable toolkits for real-time lighting and compositing, alongside experiments in distributing compute-intensive tasks to the network edge via 5G to support AR-enabled pre-visualisation and remote production workflows.

Outcomes to Date
Initial prototyping has evaluated multiple Gaussian splat and real-time rendering workflows, identifying practical limitations when applied within live production contexts. This has informed development of open-source plugins for volumetric rendering, compositing utilities and relightable Gaussian splats, alongside an emerging pipeline for integrating captured assets into real-time environments.

Next Steps
Second-stage prototyping through 2026 will refine relighting, fidelity and control toolkits, culminating in a full studio demonstrator and location-based showcase.

Why CoSTAR?
CoSTAR provides the integrated studio, compute and research environment needed to translate advanced rendering research into production-ready tools for the UK's convergent screen and performance industries.

CREATIVE AI FUTURES

Challenge

Creative AI Futures aims to embed cutting-edge advances in AI into creative industries pipelines, expanding access to new creative AI tools and technologies. AI is transforming the creation, production, delivery and user experience of media content, while also raising urgent questions around attribution, creative control and the protection of intellectual property. CoSTAR's research is advancing the state of the art in AI-enabled production while ensuring responsible and artist-led application.

Work to Date

Research has focused on four priority areas: inclusive digital actor performance capture, creative control of generative AI, converged audio-visual production, and creative provenance. Work on inclusive digital performance has introduced practical single-camera marker less motion capture for diverse body characteristics, supported by new inclusive reference datasets (see case study: Inclusive Mocap). Creative control research has developed low-latency interactive image generation using local diffusion models designed to protect creative IP (see case study: Realtime Conjuring). In parallel, converged audio-visual production is investigating immersive on-set rendering methods, while Creative Provenance is working with the UKRI DECaDE centre to develop AI-enabled approaches to copyright protection and authentication of media assets (see ACCCT Case Study below).

R&D Futures Case Study: ACCCT – AI COPYRIGHT FRAMEWORK FOR CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Challenge
Generative AI is rapidly reshaping the relationship between copyright, consent, control and access to creative data, raising urgent policy and infrastructure questions for the UK's Creative Industries. In particular, the scale of automated data ingestion through web crawling makes traditional licensing, negotiation and enforcement models increasingly difficult to apply in practice.

The Project
Commissioned by DCMS, CoSTAR National Lab published Time to ACCCT, a major cross-cutting Futures output bringing together expertise from Creative AI, Inclusive Futures, Creative Futures and Business Futures. The work built on over five years of content provenance research led by the DECaDE team (the UKRI Centre for the Decentralised Digital Economy), alongside specialist legal input from Sheridans. The National Lab convened workshops with leading creatives, rights holders, legal experts and technology companies to explore the technical and business requirements for a publicly available, machine-readable approach to consent.

Outcomes to Date
The report proposed a scalable framework for responsible AI training and use of creative works, structured around five core priorities — ACCCT: **Access, Consent, Control, Compensation and Transparency.**

It sets out a starting point for machine-readable consent infrastructure that could enable rights holders to permit or protect their work, while supporting lawful and transparent data access for AI developers.

Next Steps
CoSTAR has continued to work with DECaDE and UK Government stakeholders throughout 2025 on possible implementation pathways including through the BRAID P3R Demonstrator which will develop creative industry demonstrators of the provenance work for live performance. In parallel, the Business Futures programme has embedded Consent, Control and Compensation as central themes within its wider interventions to support responsible innovation and creative sector growth.

Why CoSTAR?
ACCCT demonstrates CoSTAR's unique ability to link deep technical research, industry realities and policy need — positioning the UK as a global leader in responsible AI consent infrastructure for creative IP.

Business Futures

Challenge
Business Futures addresses the gap between how people, including customers, audiences, artists and performers, understand and experience themselves, and how creative businesses perceive, design for and engage with them. By developing deeper insight into what people want, why they want it, and how they engage with creative experiences, the programme aims to unlock new forms of value and embed these within innovative business models that support sector growth.

Work to Date
Activity has focused on three key collaborative strands: the Future of Live Music (described in Access Programmes Section), the ACCCT project highlighted in the case study above, and the early development of the Business Futures toolkit. The long-term ambition of this toolkit is to provide creative companies with automated support for business model development. Initial work has focused on Automated Persona Generation, drawing on research undertaken with a music industry start-up (Lycett et al., 2025), with further technical progress currently under review (Lycett et al., 2026).

Creative Futures

Challenge
Creative Futures explores how emerging technologies can be applied to the creation of new story worlds across the screen and performance sectors. While technology enables new forms of production and experience, it is ultimately creative practice and storytelling that immerses audiences and generates cultural, social and commercial value. The programme therefore focuses on testing and prototyping new creative applications of emerging tools and workflows.

Work to Date
Work has centred on practice-based research methods, including Worldbuilding, to explore opportunities and challenges for creators and industries. In 2025, Creative Futures has worked with the MusicFutures Creative Cluster in Liverpool and the Music Venue Trust to develop a research programme examining how innovation can support new business models and creative pathways for the grassroots music sector. The programme has also begun exploring creative opportunities enabled by new AI workflows, including applications in live performance and short-form video production.

User and Inclusive Futures

Challenge

User and Inclusive Futures ensure that CoSTAR's technologies are designed around people — embedding human factors, user preferences, accessibility and social justice into the development of future creative tools and workflows. The programmes recognise that lasting innovation depends on technologies that reflect diverse experiences and provide equitable access for marginalised and underrepresented communities.

Work to Date

User Futures is leading a major strand of work focused on multisensory experience, with an online resource hub in development to share research insights on audience trends, perception and inclusion considerations. This hub will provide practical guidance for creators seeking to incorporate multisensory elements into immersive experiences. Across both programmes, work has also contributed to collaborative prototyping projects, including Future of Live Music and grassroots music venues initiatives. In parallel, Inclusive Futures has supported research on inclusive digital humans, including motion capture practices and datasets designed to enable more representative digital actor performance and body diversity within 3D production pipelines (see case study: Inclusive Mocap). Together, these Futures strands ensure CoSTAR's emerging technologies remain human-centred, inclusive and responsive to the needs of the UK's creative industries community.

Prototyping & Innovation

Challenge
Advanced research in creative technologies often struggles to translate into practical tools, workflows and commercially viable applications for industry. Bridging this gap requires structured collaboration between researchers, creative practitioners and businesses, enabling foundational advances in areas such as AI, motion capture and virtual production to be tested and validated in real-world creative contexts.

Work to Date
The CoSTAR National Lab Prototyping Team brings together a multidisciplinary group of researchers, producers, creative technologists, designers and developers drawn from across core partner organisations. The team accelerates early-stage research through industry-relevant creative use cases, enables hands-on engagement from creative practitioners in a de-risked R&D environment, and packages outputs into tools, code and workflows ready for adoption by industry.

Delivering four to eight strategic projects annually through intensive 12-week cycles, the team has worked with companies including Lumen Digital and Deep Fusion during 2025 to test and refine new methods emerging from Lab research. Outcomes are shared through knowledge exchange channels including Substack[11], alongside open-source releases and technical resources published via GitHub where appropriate.

Some example flagship projects developed through this approach include inclusive motion capture research (see Section 7), which has produced new datasets and practices supporting more representative digital performance and addressing longstanding biases in 3D production pipelines; the Realtime Conjuring prototype (see later in this section), which explored the integration of generative AI tools into live performance and studio environments to enable new forms of real-time creative control; and wider generative AI and creative provenance work.

Other work in 2024 focused on the initial prototyping and production viability of Gaussian Splat approaches for generating believable virtual environments and digital humans. This activity evaluated a range of emerging tools and workflows, while also identifying practical limitations in current real-time rendering and Gaussian Splat techniques when applied within live production environments. These findings have fed directly back into the Creative AI research programme, shaping a second phase of R&D focused on developing production-ready Gaussian Splat pipelines and advancing real-time performance capture and rendering capabilities.

Together, these case studies demonstrate how CoSTAR's applied research capability translates foundational advances into practical tools, workflows and methods that can be tested directly with industry, ensuring that public R&D investment delivers tangible benefit for the UK's Creative Industries.

11 https://substack.com/@costarnationallab

Prototyping Case Study: REALTIME CONJURING PROTOTYPING

The Challenge
Live performance is increasingly converging with AI-enabled production tools, creating new opportunities for real-time creative augmentation, wider digital distribution, and more accessible audience engagement. A key challenge is how generative AI can be integrated into advanced production environments in ways that remain artistically controlled, technically feasible and democratised.

The Project
In spring 2025, CoSTAR National Lab undertook a prototyping project exploring how audio and visual generative AI systems could be embedded within converged media production pipelines for live performance. The work focused on enabling real-time control of lighting, LED volumes, spatial audio and in-camera visual effects in response to improvised studio performance, while designing workflows orientated towards streaming and emerging immersive platforms.

A particular focus was the integration of Nitro Fusion, a fast-rendering image generation tool developed by the University of Surrey. Nitro Fusion's ability to generate images in near real time, alongside LoRA-based stylisation techniques, offered a powerful opportunity to develop distinctive visual identities for live performance while maintaining artistic integrity and control.

Outcomes to Date
The prototype demonstrated new workflows for AI-enhanced studio performance, combining physical and digital production elements and exploring how audiences could potentially interact with generative processes at a cost and access level suitable for wider sector adoption. Findings have been shared through demos to industry and via the National Lab's knowledge exchange channels.

Next Steps
Building on this first-stage prototype, CoSTAR is progressing further applied research and second stage prototyping informed directly by production testing. The team is also seeking industry partners to trial emerging workflows and creative formats through collaborative R&D, as well as wider tool releases via the Access Programmes, ensuring continuous feedback between research, prototyping and real-world deployment.

Why CoSTAR?
Realtime Conjuring illustrates how CoSTAR's prototyping capability translates early-stage research into applied creative innovation, accelerating new production formats that can be adopted across the UK's screen and performance industries.

Why This Matters
By providing structured national routes into advanced facilities, expertise and applied R&D, CoSTAR's research, prototyping and Access Programmes are strengthening the UK's creative technology ecosystem—helping SMEs innovate, scale and compete globally while maximising the long-term impact of public infrastructure investment.

Section 6: EDI and Sustainability

End-to-End Inclusion

Our vision is to establish an inclusive and diverse environment in which innovative technologies and workflows are developed through the rich perspectives of people with different experiences and backgrounds. EDI and sustainability are integral to how the Lab operates, shaping our culture, programmes and partnerships.
We aim to foster a community that reflects the diversity of society, where difference is valued and respected, and where all Lab users are supported to strengthen their commitments to inclusive and sustainable innovation.

At the heart of our infrastructure and programmes is a belief that the UK can establish a global competitive advantage in the creation, development and exploitation of new creative industries IP, underpinned by a commitment to inclusive innovation.

This is reflected in our Inclusive Futures Research programme, which is structured as a diffuse and integrated web of activity. Team members contribute across multiple research strands, while colleagues from other programmes actively participate in Inclusive Futures R&D (see case study). This diffusion and integration ensures that inclusive innovation remains central to CoSTAR's work, particularly through the Prototyping Programme, which accelerates research and connects it to industry through company-led prototyping activity, as well as the release of IP, code repositories, guides and use cases to the wider sector.

Beyond our internal R&D, we are committed to supporting 100% of Access Programme users to complete social impact work packages, providing specialist EDI and/or environmental sustainability training to strengthen not only individual projects but company-wide inclusive innovation practice. We also provide additional support to reduce barriers to participation across our Access Programmes, including bursaries to meet a wide range of inclusion needs.

From project planning to delivery, and from company formation through to growth and scaling, CoSTAR's Access Programmes provide an end-to-end approach to inclusive innovation, helping to realise the long-term benefits of the National Lab infrastructure. This is complimented by CoSTAR's alignment with national skills and talent pipelines, including the UKRI Centre for Doctoral Training in AI for Digital Media Inclusion, a pioneering programme placing inclusion at the heart of creative AI research. Through challenge-led PhD research and close collaboration with industry, the CDT is training future creative industry leaders to develop AI-driven media technologies that serve diverse audiences and deliver real-world impact.

Progress at a Glance: EDI and Sustainability Training KPIs

CoSTAR is committed to ensuring that **100% of Access Programme companies** complete relevant Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Environmental Sustainability training as part of their engagement with the National Lab. Current progress is summarised below.

KPI: Environmental Sustainability Knowledge Exchange

- **Target:** 100% of Access Programme participants
- **Progress to date:** 18 out of 51 companies completed training (35%)
  - 15 Enterprise & Commercialisation (E&C) companies
  - 3 Prototypes and Pilots Programme (PPP) companies

KPI: EDI Knowledge Exchange

- **Target:** 100% of Access Programme participants
- **Progress to date:** 14 of 51 companies completed training (28%)
  - 10 Enterprise & Commercialisation (E&C) companies
  - 4 Prototypes and Pilots Programme (PPP) companies
- **Next steps:** We continue to encourage and support the remaining companies to complete this training as part of their ongoing engagement with CoSTAR.

Case Study: R&D FOR INCLUSIVE MOCAP

The Challenge
Motion capture underpins realistic digital performance in film, games and immersive media, yet most datasets assume normative body characteristics. This limits accurate representation of disabled and diverse performers, a challenge mirrored across emerging generative AI tools trained on unrepresentative data.

The Project
Through the Inclusive Futures R&D programme, CoSTAR captured motion data from seven disabled actors over two days using both marker less and marker-based systems. The project centred performers within the research process, addressing both technical outcomes and inclusive practice.

Outcomes to Date
The work has produced a unique inclusive reference dataset and emerging methods to support more authentic digital actor performance and representative 3D production workflows.

Next Steps
The dataset, research publications and practical guidance will be released sector-wide in 2026.

Why CoSTAR?
The project shows how CoSTAR can embed inclusive innovation directly into new production pipelines, shaping more equitable creative technologies from the ground up.

Section 6: EDI and Sustainability

Commitments and Progress

The CoSTAR National Lab is committed to promoting an inclusive environment that reflects and respects the diversity of UK society. As a national infrastructure spanning both commercial and public sector partners, interdisciplinary research, and multiple creative sub-sectors, there is no single benchmark that fully captures the complexity of our operating context.

CoSTAR's work sits at the intersection of Arts and Humanities, Engineering and Physical Sciences, and the Social Sciences, while our production environment spans film, television, games and live performance. Each of these sub-sectors has distinct workforce demographics and employment patterns, and our approach to EDI must therefore be responsive, iterative and evidence led.

Our EDI Action Plan is aligned with the **BFI Inclusion Targets**, which are based on the proportionality of the UK working-age population (April 2023). We measure progress annually through both internal culture indicators and external R&D engagement across companies using the CoSTAR Network.

We will continue to collect and report diversity metrics publicly and to our primary funder, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), in compliance with GDPR. Current progress against our commitments is summarised on the right.

DISABILITY

Commitment:
18% of staff identifying as disabled

8.5% of staff identify as disabled

22.2% identify as having a long-term disability

ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Commitment:
30% of staff identifying as ethnically diverse

28%
of staff identify as ethnically diverse

GENDER REPRESENTATION

Commitment:
50:50 balance within the gender binary, and equity across the gender spectrum.

National Lab Staff Gender (n = 50):

Man:	Woman:	Prefer not to say:	No response:	Non-binary / prefer to self-describe:
24 (48%)	22 (44%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)

Data correct as of December 2025.

Section 6: EDI and Sustainability

TRANS STATUS

Yes:	No:	Prefer not to say:	No response:
0 (0%)	46 (92%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Commitment:
10% of staff identifying as LGBTQIA+ (including those outside the gender binary)

Heterosexual:	Bisexual:	Prefer not to say:
41 (82%)	1 (2%)	6 (12%)

No response:	Other identities (gay, lesbian, queer, pansexual, asexual, self-describe):
2 (4%)	0 (0%)

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

39% **of staff report coming from a working-class background (using the UK Government definition)**

Ongoing Commitment

These metrics represent an early snapshot of National Lab staffing in 2025. We will continue to embed inclusive recruitment, culture and programme delivery as CoSTAR grows, and will support companies accessing the Network to strengthen their own inclusive innovation practices through our Access Programmes and knowledge exchange activity.

Integrating Inclusive Innovation for All

CoSTAR's EDI support is delivered in collaboration with Inclusioneering, an inclusive innovation consultancy specialising in equitable technology design. Two half-day online sessions were delivered to companies participating in CoSTAR Access Programmes, focusing on inclusive design principles, unconscious bias, and responsible innovation practices. This training establishes a shared baseline of EDI capability across participating industry partners and is embedded as a core requirement within CoSTAR's Access Framework.

Integrating Environmental Sustainability in Production

CoSTAR's Environmental Sustainability programme is delivered in partnership with **BAFTA albert**, the leading screen industry organisation supporting low-carbon production. BAFTA albert training, delivered over two half-day sessions, provides a practical introduction to environmental sustainability in screen production.

The programme equips participants with core carbon literacy, an understanding of how emissions are generated across the production lifecycle, and hands-on guidance on using albert tools to measure and reduce environmental impact. It supports teams to identify realistic interventions, align productions with industry sustainability standards, and work towards albert certification, embedding low-carbon decision-making into everyday production practice.

Why This Matters

By embedding inclusion, accessibility and environmental responsibility into national creative technology infrastructure, CoSTAR is helping ensure that the UK's future creative industries growth is not only globally competitive, but also equitable, sustainable and aligned with responsible innovation principles.

Section 7: Co-Investment & Leverage

Co-Investment

From the outset, CoSTAR was designed to operate beyond the initial £51.1m AHRC–UKRI grant, with co-investment forming a core pillar of long-term sustainability and national infrastructure impact.

Co-investment plays three critical roles:

1. **Demonstrating industry demand for R&D.** Building on the success of the Creative Industries Clusters Programme — including StoryFutures, which returned £4 for every £1 of grant funding — co-investment evidences strong sector appetite for collaborative innovation.
2. **Ensuring shared commitment across industry, academia and government.** Partner investment creates a two-way innovation flow, ensuring research translates into commercial practice while industry need directly informs R&D priorities.
3. **Maintaining a future-facing infrastructure.** Additional investment enables the National Lab to evolve in line with technological change and sector demand, ensuring long-term relevance and capability.

Founding Partner Contributions

Initial founding partners provided significant cash and in-kind investment at bid and early delivery stage:

- **Higher Education Partners (RHUL, University of Surrey, Abertay University, NFTS):** £15.9m
- **Industry Initial Partners (Pinewood, BT & Disguise):** £5.93m
- **Local Authority Innovation (Surrey County Council):** £3m
- **Total:** £24.83m

This represents an early leverage ratio of **£0.49 partner co-investment for every £1 of AHRC–UKRI funding**, demonstrating strong additionality and alignment with UKRI priorities around value for money, sustainability and catalytic public investment.

Growth in Co-Investment

CoSTAR has a long-term ambition to secure **£10m additional co-investment** beyond founding partner contributions, alongside Network-wide targets of **£5m per Access Programme.**

Since launch, **£15.2m of additional match, aligned and accompanying co-investment** has already been secured through cash and in-kind contributions including:

- AI Data Centre investment from the University of Surrey.
- AHRC BRAID funding for the P3R responsible AI programme.
- UKRI EPSRC funding for the Centre for Doctoral Training in AI for Digital Media Inclusion.

These contributions demonstrate strong confidence in CoSTAR's direction and provide a solid foundation for continued leverage growth.

Importantly, this investment also enables SMEs engaging with CoSTAR to increase their own internal R&D investment, strengthening innovation across the wider creative industries ecosystem. We discuss this SME investment in Section 2 on KPIs and Section 4 on the CoSTAR Access Programmes.

Leveraging CoSTAR

Leveraging CoSTAR is essential to maximising the long-term impact of public investment, demonstrating how national infrastructure can attract additional funding, partnerships and talent pipelines that strengthen the UK's creative technology ecosystem and ensure its sustainability beyond the initial grant period.

The following case studies illustrate how CoSTAR is already leveraging this investment through aligned research funding and skills development initiatives that extend the reach and value of the National Lab.

Case Study:
BRAID – P3R EQUITABLE FUTURES FOR LIVE MUSIC

In 2024/25, CoSTAR research teams secured £1.8 million in aligned co-investment through a BRAID[12] (Bridging Responsible AI Divides) award to support new research on the ethical and responsible deployment of AI across the UK's screen and performance sectors. The project, P3R (Performance, Participation, Provenance, Reward): Equitable Futures for Live Music, explores how emerging AI technologies can support fairer and more sustainable creative ecosystems, with an initial focus on the live music sector.

P3R builds directly on earlier CoSTAR work, including the National Lab's Time to ACCCT report and Professor John Collomosse's DECaDE research on content provenance and AI training models, alongside Creative Futures activity examining how technology can support more equitable futures for grassroots live music.

The programme is delivered through a collaboration between Royal Holloway, the University of Surrey and Abertay University, and spans research into performance futures, ethical data practices, and the development of new technical and creative demonstrators. Early work has established foundations for the next phase of provenance-focused research and open innovation activity.

P3R will culminate in an audience-facing demonstrator in live performance venues in 2027, providing a practical testbed for responsible AI approaches that support participation, trust and equitable reward across the live music sector.

12 https://braiduk.org/demonstrator-projects

Case Study:
UKRI CENTRE FOR DOCTORAL TRAINING IN AI FOR DIGITAL MEDIA INCLUSION

CoSTAR's impact is further strengthened through alignment with national skills and talent pipelines, including the UKRI Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) in AI for Digital Media Inclusion[13], led by the University of Surrey in partnership with the StoryFutures team at Royal Holloway and industry collaborators. This pioneering programme places inclusion, accessibility and responsible innovation at the heart of creative AI research and development.

The CDT is training a new generation of interdisciplinary researchers and future industry leaders capable of developing AI-driven media technologies that better serve diverse audiences and creative practitioners. Through challenge-led PhD projects and close collaboration with industry partners, doctoral researchers are working on real-world problems across areas such as inclusive content creation, accessible media experiences, and responsible AI deployment in creative production pipelines.

CoSTAR provides a vital applied research and innovation environment for this work, offering access to advanced facilities, datasets, and industry engagement opportunities across the CoSTAR Network. In turn, CDT researchers contribute to CoSTAR's research and prototyping activity, strengthening the Lab's capacity in emerging areas such as creative AI, digital humans and inclusive production workflows.

Together, this collaboration ensures that investment in infrastructure is matched by investment in people — building the skills, leadership and research capability required to sustain the UK's global competitiveness in creative technology and responsible AI innovation.

13 https://www.surrey.ac.uk/artificial-intelligence/cdt

Section 7: Co-Investment & Leverage

Industry Partnerships

Industry partners play a core role in the development and delivery of the CoSTAR National Lab, providing leadership, expertise and strategic direction across its activities. Their collaboration helps cultivate a wider innovation ecosystem that delivers tangible benefits across the UK's creative industries.

Partners contribute significant cash and in-kind support to ensure the Lab's long-term sustainability. This includes locating our National Lab in the centre of world-class production facilities at Pinewood Studios, alongside specialist hardware, software and technical expertise from founding partners including BT and Disguise. These assets are made available across the CoSTAR Network, enabling companies and researchers to undertake R&D, experimentation and innovation using industry-grade tools and environments.

Embedding commercial partners within the National Lab creates a structured two-way collaboration between research and industry. This ensures that CoSTAR's Applied Research and Prototyping, and the Access Programmes remain aligned with real-world market needs, while enabling partners to identify shared research priorities, accelerate innovation pathways and strengthen routes to commercial adoption. Evidence from comparable programmes suggests such collaborative R&D activity can deliver significant returns within a 2–3-year horizon.

Section 7: Co-Investment & Leverage

Through engagement with the CoSTAR National Lab, industry partners will benefit from:

- **Influencing future technologies:**
  Help shape the direction of convergent media and next-generation creative production in the UK.
- **Direct access to national infrastructure:**
  Work within the Pinewood ecosystem and across the CoSTAR Network to develop and test transformative tools, workflows and production pipelines.
- **Applied R&D expertise and capability:**
  Collaborate with leading researchers and technologists across AI, CreaTech, business innovation and user experience.
- **Cost-effective innovation and partnership building:**
  Reduce R&D costs through shared facilities and expertise while forming new strategic collaborations across the sector.
- **Commercial advantage and early insight:**
  Access eligible outputs from collaborative R&D and participate in early-stage commercialisation opportunities emerging from CoSTAR innovation.

Partners also help to open international doors for the Lab. In September 2025, the British Consul General to Los Angeles hosted the CoSTAR Network for an industry event featuring Lynwen Brennan, Co-President of Lucasfilm — a long-term supporter of CoSTAR and Royal Holloway — in conversation with our founding Director of Technology and former Apple camera lead, Professor meriko borogove. This event provided CoSTAR with a global platform, recognising the National Lab infrastructure as a world-first and attracting significant international interest in UK creative industries R&D.

We will be announcing a range of new partnerships in our third year of operation as the CoSTAR Stage and National Lab infrastructure at Pinewood Studios becomes operational.

We are always interested in exploring new partnership opportunities that support the UK's Creative Industries innovation ecosystem. For further information, please contact: costar@rhul.ac.uk

Why This Matters

By leveraging significant industry, academic and public co-investment, CoSTAR is transforming initial public funding into a sustainable national infrastructure that strengthens UK competitiveness, accelerates innovation adoption and maximises long-term economic return.

Section 8: Looking Ahead to 2026 and Beyond

As demand from industry continues to grow, 2026 and beyond will mark a transition from early delivery into a national ramp-up phase, focused on scaling access, managing capacity, and maximising the long-term impact of CoSTAR's infrastructure across the UK. This next phase will also deepen CoSTAR's commitment to responsible innovation, ensuring that inclusive practice, environmental sustainability and IP protection remain embedded as adoption accelerates.

Building on the successful launch of our Access and Futures Programmes, the coming year will see further infrastructure coming online, deeper industry collaboration, and expanded opportunities for creative companies to engage with world-leading R&D facilities and expertise, strengthening national capability across the CoSTAR Network.

R&D Infrastructure

A major priority will be preparing for the opening of the CoSTAR Stage and National Lab facilities at Pinewood Studios, alongside the continued expansion of our AI Compute. Our Phase 2 plans for the AI Compute infrastructure will enable significantly increased collaboration with industry partners, supporting the co-development of AI models tailored to real production challenges.

Our Three Priorities for 2026

Over the next year, our delivery will focus on three coordinated priorities:

1. **Pinewood readiness and CoSTAR Network ramp-up** — completing the build and launch of the CoSTAR National Lab facility at Pinewood while continuing to scale up national access through the distributed Lab network.
2. **AI Compute Phase 2 and the 'AI for Creativity' initiative** — expanding advanced compute capability and launching new industry-facing AI support.
3. **Scaling Access Programmes and responsible innovation** — widening SME engagement while embedding inclusion, sustainability and ethical technology adoption.

Section 8: Looking Ahead to 2026 and Beyond

Access Programmes

At the same time, we will strengthen delivery of national infrastructure through the distributed CoSTAR Network of R&D Labs across the UK. As usage continues to increase, we will scale access routes for SMEs through expanded Prototypes and Pilots activity, an always-on Enterprise & Commercialisation offer, and new partnerships that strengthen pathways from research to adoption and commercial impact.

Reflecting these coordinated ambitions, in 2026 the CoSTAR Network will launch a new 'AI for Creativity' initiative (working title), one of the Network's key priority areas for the year ahead. The initiative will provide practical support for companies contributing to the growth of the UK's creative economy, enabling them to explore how AI can best enhance creative work while preserving essential principles of responsible innovation, human creativity and the protection and control of IP.

An anticipated £1m package of support will be made available through a combination of cash funding, access to AI compute infrastructure, business development support and knowledge exchange activity. This will enable companies to develop new forms of technical and creative IP, and to undertake R&D exploring responsible approaches to AI that can serve as examples of best practice for the wider sector.

Research Programmes

Building on our initial Creative AI research, work will advance across four priority areas: inclusive digital humans; safe and controllable generative AI models that protect creative IP; converged audio-visual rendering for immersive performance environments; and creative provenance approaches to tracing and authenticating IP within AI systems.

User Futures will launch the multisensory resource hub, alongside an extensive programme of industry engagement. We will begin new experiments to better understand the value of multisensory enhancement for audiences — an area that remains significantly under-researched — and will continue collaborative work through large-scale audience data collection and analysis linked to the grassroots music venues programme.

With innovation infrastructure now established, Creative Futures will increase opportunities for IP holders and creators to test and explore the capabilities being developed through CoSTAR. New relationships are being forged at Pinewood, including with the Indy Film Hub, alongside discussions with distributors across the UK to support onward commercial journeys for the most promising outputs emerging from CSNL-supported companies. We will also ramp up creative experimentation enabled by national access to AI Compute and other converged production tools.

Building a Responsible and Sustainable Innovation Ecosystem

Across all activity, CoSTAR will continue to embed inclusion, sustainability and responsible innovation as core principles of national infrastructure delivery. Through structured training, knowledge exchange and research programmes such as ACCCT and P3R, we aim to ensure that the UK remains globally competitive not only in creative technology innovation, but also in ethical, inclusive and future-facing adoption.

Together, these priorities position 2026 as a year of significant growth for CoSTAR, strengthening the UK's convergent screen and performance R&D ecosystem and accelerating the pathways through which creative businesses can innovate, scale and compete globally.

Economic Sustainability

A central priority for the next phase of CoSTAR is securing the long-term economic sustainability of the National Lab and Network beyond March 2029. As a national research infrastructure, CoSTAR has been designed to deliver lasting value for the UK's creative industries, but sustaining and growing this capability will require a blended funding model that combines public investment, commercial revenue and strategic partnership.

While CoSTAR represents the largest single infrastructure investment made by AHRC to date, it remains modest in scale compared to major UKRI scientific facilities.

For example, the £225m Isambard-AI facility developed by the University of Bristol significantly exceeds current levels of investment in creative industries R&D infrastructure. This contrast is notable given the scale and economic contribution of the UK's creative industries. In 2022, the sector generated 5.7% of total UK GVA (£124.6bn), exceeding the combined value of aerospace, oil and gas, life sciences and automotive industries (£83.1bn). The sector also invests more in its own R&D than the UK average (3.2% compared to 2.3%), yet continues to receive a comparatively small share of public research funding. Even with UKRI's recent £369m commitment to the creative industries, this represents less than 1% of total UK research and innovation funding for 2026–2030[14].

Against this backdrop, CoSTAR will use the coming period to develop sustainable business and funding models that align industry demand with the UK's research and innovation strengths. This will include exploring options for core public funding alongside commercial access to facilities and services, strategic partnerships, co-investment and additional grant income secured collaboratively across the CoSTAR Network and with AHRC–UKRI.

Together, these approaches will ensure that CoSTAR continues to operate as a globally significant creative R&D infrastructure, capable of supporting innovation, productivity and growth across the UK's creative economy over the long term.

14 Creative Industries Council comment at: https://www.thecreativeindustries.co.uk/site-content/govt-advised-to-encourage-r-d-investment-to-grow-creative-economy

Section 9: CSNL Further Information

CoSTAR National Lab Leadership Team

The CoSTAR National Lab leadership team comprises of:

- **James Bennett**, Outgoing Director, CoSTAR National Lab, RHUL
- **Sarah Smyth**, Director of Operations / Interim Co-Director, RHUL
- **Ade Woolard**, Director of Technology / Interim Co-Director, RHUL
- **Miles Bernie**, Co-Head of Innovation, NFTS
- **Abi Bowman**, Head of Enterprise & Commercialisation, RHUL
- **Angela Chan**, Head of Inclusive Futures, RHUL
- **Polly Dalton**, Head of Audience Futures, RHUL
- **Ruth Falconer**, Head of CreaTech, Abertay University
- **Becky Gregory-Clarke**, Co-Head of Innovation, NFTS
- **Adrian Hilton**, Head of Creative AI, University of Surrey
- **Olivia Hinkin**, Head of Programme Delivery, RHUL
- **Mark Lycett**, Head of Business Futures, RHUL
- **Deepa Mann-Kler**, Inclusion Executive Producer, RHUL
- **Will Saunders MBE**, Creative Head, RHUL

CoSTAR National Lab Advisory Council

The CoSTAR Leadership is supported by an expert Advisory Council comprised of:

- **Ally Castle MBE**
- **Christine Martin**
- **Julie Craik**
- **Mary McKenna MBE**
- **Mike Anaman**
- **Sara Pepper**
- **Suhair Khan**
- **Tamara Howe**
- **Ved Sen**

CoSTAR National Lab Communication Channels

Website: https://www.costarnetwork.co.uk/

Substack: https://substack.com/@costarnationallab

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/costarnetwork

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/@costarnetwork

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/costar-national-lab

Email: costar@rhul.ac.uk

Thanks

With sincere thanks to all current and recent research and operational staff who have contributed to the delivery of the ambitious CoSTAR National Lab. Thanks also to our colleagues in the CoSTAR Network, as well as to our partners, collaborators, suppliers and Industry Advisory Council for their continued support and commitment.

In 2025, we sadly lost a valued colleague to cancer. We wish to recognise their important contribution to the Lab and acknowledge that their generosity of spirit will continue to live on through the collaborative and cross-functional ethos that defines CoSTAR.

CoSTAR

THE UK R&D NETWORK FOR CREATIVE TECHNOLOGY

NationalLAB

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