



Wates Group & Koestler Arts 2024 Visitor's Choice Awards Report

Koestler Arts work to change minds on the Outside

The public has few opportunities to learn about the positive work that takes place inside prisons and other secure settings –to see the individuals behind the statistics. Through exhibitions, events, publications and online showcasing, Koestler Arts gives the public a chance to experience the creative talents and unique perspectives of people within, and with lived experience of, the criminal justice system. These instances have the potential to initiate fruitful conversations, helping to build communities that support rehabilitation.

The feedback we receive from the public, year after year, demonstrates how our showcasing efforts truly move people and provide them with new perspectives, as evidenced by this quote from the 2024 national exhibition visitor book:

Absolutely blown away. Moving. A reminder of humanity in us all - and how it can be ignored.



Changing Lives on the Inside

The feedback cards are the best thing about entering the Koestler Awards and having a piece of art exhibited. I look back at them whenever I have a low day or start to doubt myself and they make me feel like I can go on.

- 2024 Koestler Awards Entrant



Encouragement can make a real difference to an individual's self-esteem and their motivation to continue engaging with art. Evidence suggests that art can have a positive impact on feelings of well-being and even become a stepping stone for engaging in education.

Receiving dedicated, personalised feedback from expert arts professionals, volunteers, and the public on their artistic creations is often stated by our beneficiaries as one of the most rewarding aspects of taking part in our programmes, and has become one of the key areas of the charity's work.

Every year, entrants to the Koestler Awards tell us that constructive and affirming comments on their submissions mean a huge amount to them.

Wates' support in FY 2024/25 allowed us to carry out the necessary work to engage audiences and provide feedback to our entrants at our last two exhibitions.

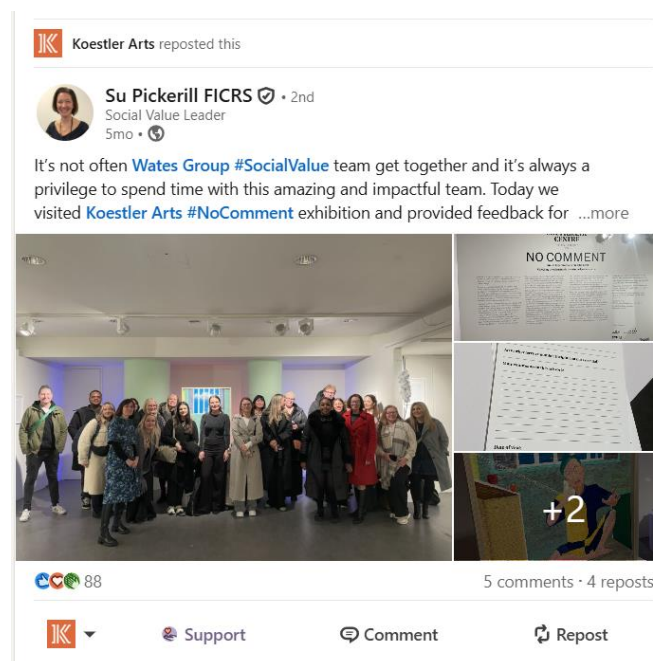
Through over 11,000 handwritten feedback cards, the public chose their favourites. We are delighted to share with you the **Visitor's Choice Award Winners** of the 2024 Awards cycle in this report.

We are grateful to everyone at **Wates** who made this project possible and look forward to continuing this meaningful partnership.

Our Partnership

Koestler Arts were delighted to welcome five Wates representatives, **Eoghan O'Lionaird**, **Steve Beechey**, **Phil Shortman**, **Sasha Simmonds** and **Tracy Tyson**, to the private view of our UK exhibition 'No Comment' at the Southbank Centre in 2024.

The exhibition was inaugurated by **Lord James Timpson**, the UK Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending.



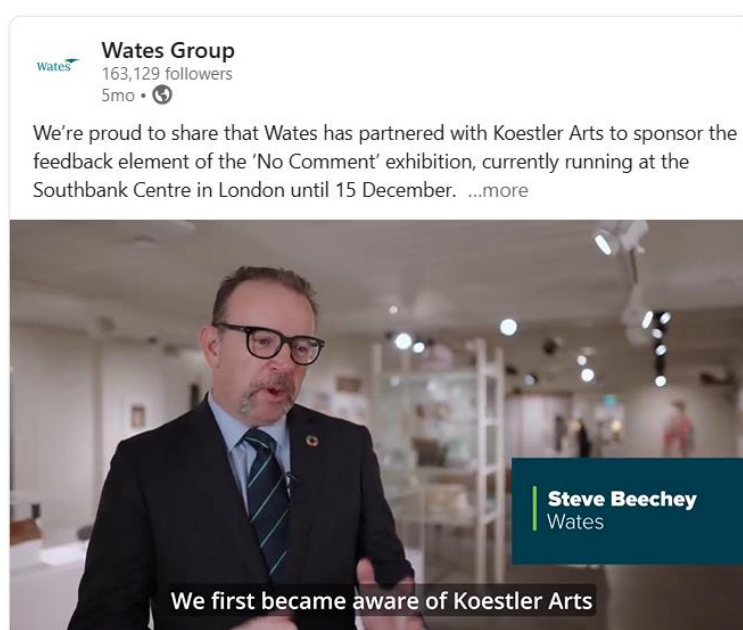
We were also excited to host the **Wates Social Value team** for a private tour and feedback session of 'No Comment' on the 28th November, led by our Chief Executive, **Fiona Curran**. The team kindly took part in filling out audience feedback cards for their chosen artworks.

The Koestler team very much appreciated Wates' close and enthusiastic involvement with the exhibition - this level of personal engagement truly means the world to our charity and beneficiaries within the criminal justice system.

Our Director of Outreach, Sarah Matheve was pleased to welcome **Wates' Group Public Sector Director, Steve Beechey**, for a tour of the exhibition on the 4th December, along with colleagues from the Wates Public Sector team.

The Koestler team was also incredibly excited by the film produced by Wates about the exhibition and the partnership, where **Steve Beechey** spoke poignantly about the exhibition, the Visitor's Choice Awards, and Koestler Arts' overall mission.

The short video was published on the Wates LinkedIn feed - enacting Wates' primary social value strategy of creating opportunities. Koestler Arts reposted the video on our social media, and extremely appreciated the public and internal engagement that our partnership with Wates has created.



The Visitor's Choice Awards

In 2024, Wates Group kindly donated £10,000 to support the **Visitors' Choice Awards** for our 17th annual UK exhibition 'No Comment' at the Southbank Centre, as well as our regional exhibition 'Almost Home' at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead.

Because of the generous sponsorship of Wates Group, we were able to run our **Audience Feedback** project at both exhibitions to provide our exhibited artists with encouragement to continue engaging with art during their time in a secure setting.

Thousands of **Audience Feedback cards** including the **Wates logo** were printed and placed at the exhibition for the public to fill. While providing feedback, the audience was also casting their vote for their favourite pieces to win the **Visitors' Choice Awards**. The four artworks with the most cards were awarded the **Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze Awards**, receiving bespoke certificates and a cash prize (£100, £60, £40 and £20).

This participatory feature of the exhibition invites visitors to look at the works more closely, to reflect on what they see, ultimately improving their experience. Knowing they'll be helping to select the winners provides them with extra motivation to fill the cards.

With a total of **11,340 feedback cards** produced over the course of the two exhibitions, our visitors helped to reach our goal of providing every single artwork on display with at least one sample of personalised feedback.

'The comment cards are my favourite part of the Koestler Arts experience. I feel like I am communicating with the public. Please take a moment to write something, as I keep them all.'
(Koestler Awards artist)

Title of artwork:

Free As a bird in prison

Artwork reference number (helpful but not essential):

NFS 5788

Your comments on this artwork:

Your work made me cry and feel
joyful too.
my dad was in prison
when I was growing up. I think your
birds unleashed some sadness in me
that needed to fly free.

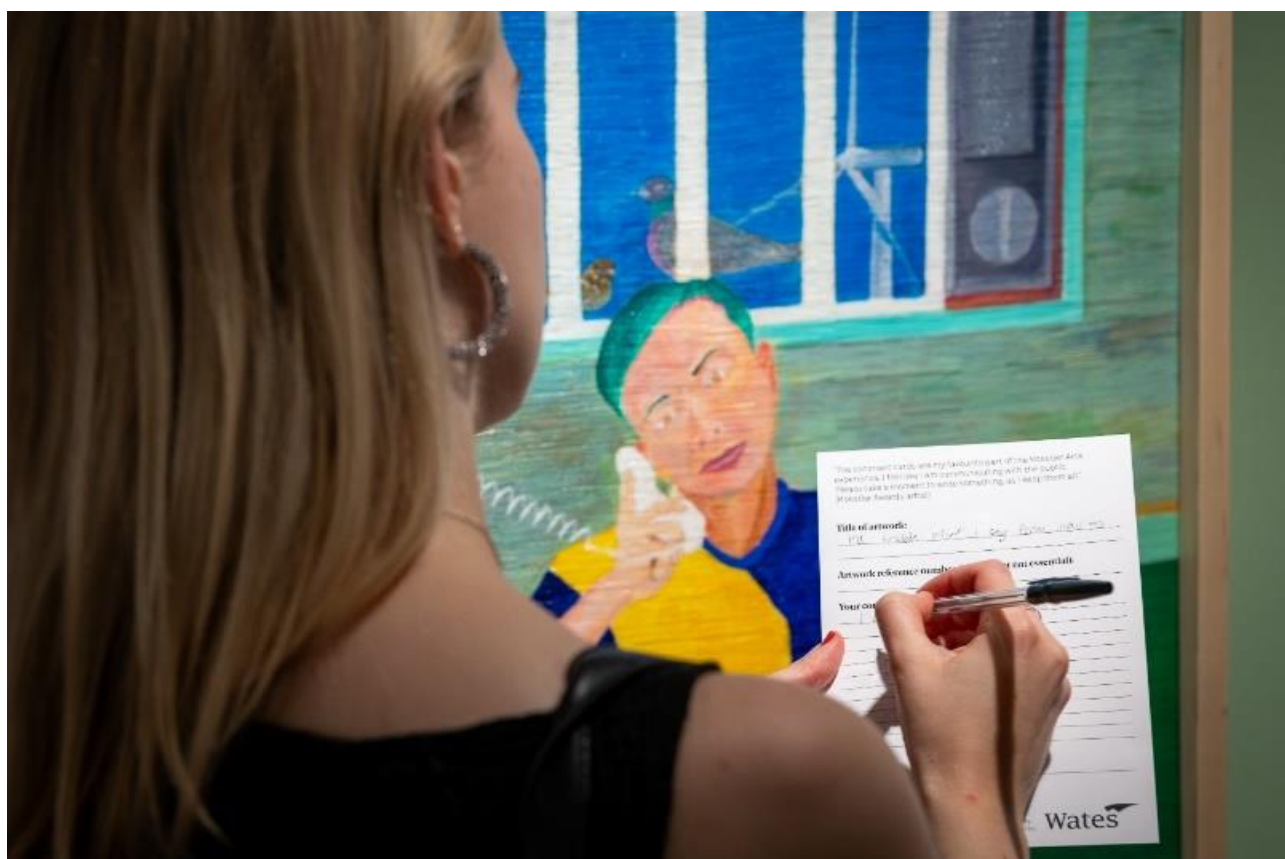
Thank you.
I also love birds so much.
your birds are beautiful and special.

Date of visit:

15 / 11 / 24

The Visitors' Choice Awards
are generously supported by:

Wates



NO COMMENT

Southbank Centre, London - 1st November to 15th December 2024

Our 17th annual UK exhibition at Southbank Centre welcomed over **11,500 visitors** and featured **258 pieces of fine art, design, music and writing** entered into the 2024 Koestler Awards from secure settings across the UK. The title and curation of the exhibition drew upon lived realities of the criminal justice system, experiencing a lack of voice and finding a way to overcome this through creative expression.

‘No Comment’ was a very special exhibition in Koestler’s history, as it was co-curated by two renowned artists with long histories of working directly with the charity: **Jeremy Deller and John Costi**. Jeremy has been volunteering as an Awards Judge since the early 2000s, and John started as an award-winning entrant before becoming one of our first mentees, then member of staff, Awards judge and now curator.

Audience feedback played an important role in this exhibition; John’s memories of receiving feedback cards when he was a Koestler Arts beneficiary demonstrate the transformative effect it can have on an individual:

‘When I got feedback sent to my cell from Koestler in 2008, I felt like maybe I was an artist after all? Maybe I was born to put into the world, rather than take?’

- John Costi

Over the course of the exhibition, a total of **10,649 audience feedback cards** were produced by visitors, with every single artwork on display receiving some form of personalised feedback.

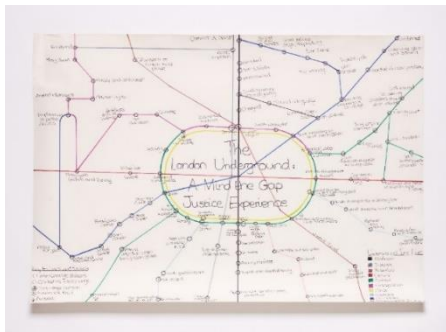
Visitors' Choice Award Winners 2024: No Comment

Visitor’s Choice Platinum Award: Jenga Jungle, HMP Ashfield, Woodcraft -338 votes

This work was created from Jenga pieces by a long-time entrant to the Koestler Awards. Having submitted poetry every year since 2021, this was the artist’s first time submitting a piece of visual artwork - a huge success for someone trying their hand at woodcraft for the first time in a secure setting.

Visitors commented on the tenderness and playfulness of the piece, for example *“amazing to whittle such joyous tiny things out of an everyday object”* and the skilful technique; *“the craftsmanship is amazing, the pieces are so detailed and smooth”*.





Visitor's Choice Gold Award: *The Prison Tube*, HMP Peterborough, Themed Category: From Now On - 334 votes

This work, which also won a Commended Award, highlighted the complex journey through the criminal justice system; *“what an amazing way to show the complexities of life, prison, freedom, expectations, how it's interconnected”*.

Visitor's Choice Silver Award: *Judged*, HMP Dovegate, Ceramics - 313 votes

Judged was awarded a Platinum Award in the 2024 Koestler Awards, inspiring and surprising with its clever use of imagery. Exhibition visitors were particularly impressed by the emotions conveyed by the piece - *“Thank you for calling out the harm and ugliness of shame”*



Visitor's Choice Bronze Award:

***Free as a Bird in Prison*, HMP Wormwood Scrubs, Sculpture - 258 Votes**



This was the first time that this artist had had their work exhibited in a public exhibition. This piece, which was Commended in the 2024 Koestler Awards, inspired emotional and personal responses from the viewers; *“Your work made me cry and feel joyful too. My dad was in prison when I was growing up. I think your birds unleashed some sadness in me that needed to fly free”*.

Almost Home

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art - 19th February to 11th May 2025

This exhibition was co-curated by **six women serving sentences at HM Prison & Young Offender Institution Low Newton**. Over the course of four sessions delivered by Koestler Arts in the prison's art class, the women considered almost **300** works of art, music and writing created in prisons, young offender institutions, secure hospitals and on probation in the Northeast of England and entered into the 2024 Koestler Awards, selecting **70** to be displayed in the exhibition.

The selected works reflected the shared experience of looking outwards and forwards towards freedom and home, while honouring the diversity of experience amongst the curators and the exhibited artists. More than **33,000 people** visited Baltic during the exhibition run, and many shared how the exhibition had inspired, moved and informed them:

Loved this - thanks for giving us a glimpse of life inside and seeing the stories and the people behind the art.

- Visitor to 'Almost Home', Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2025

Throughout the exhibition, visitors wrote a total of **691 audience feedback cards** on the displayed artworks, which were sent directly to the exhibited artists. Thanks to Wates' support, we hope that the exhibitors will feel encouraged and inspired by reading what the public loved most about their work.

Visitor's Choice Award Winners 2024: *Almost Home*

Visitor's Choice Platinum Award: *Flight - Blueprint for an Astronaut*, Aycliffe Secure Centre, Printmaking -55 votes

This piece, which won a Highly Commended Award for Printmaking in the 2024 Koestler Awards, impressed judges with its technical skill and evocative subject matter. Audiences agreed:

"The standout piece in this exhibition. A very intelligent work in concept and technique."



Visitor's Choice Gold Award: *Expressives*, HM Prison Holme House, Portrait -52 votes

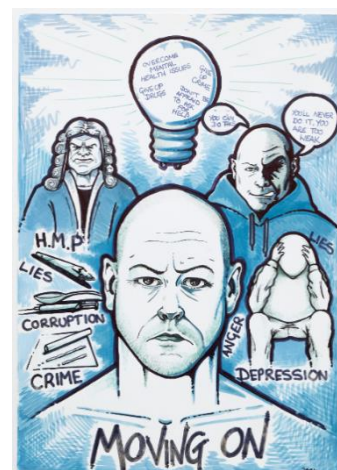


Audiences found this three-part portrait thought-provoking, disturbing and powerful:

"The artist has captured the pain and depth of emotion so beautifully."

Visitor's Choice Silver Award: *Moving On*, HM Prison Northumberland, Themed Category: From Now On -49 Votes

This piece, which was entered into the 2024 Awards themed category, 'From Now On' and received a commendation from Koestler judges, was described as informative and eye-opening by visitors: *"a very honest assessment of the challenges of being in and coming out of prison."*



Visitor's Choice Bronze Award: *It Always Makes Me Feel Good*, HM Prison Frankland, Portrait -28 Votes

Visitors found this large-scale, mixed-media work to be full of joy, sparkle and magic: *"Quirky, soulful and spiritual. I love how you used different mediums and so much colour!"*

Acknowledgements

The 2024 Visitor's Choice Awards at both 'No Comment' and 'Almost Home' were widely publicised online and in person, and Wates' support was credited on all platforms.

Wates' support for the Visitor's Choice Awards was prominently credited during both exhibitions, with the Wates brand name and/or logo printed on the wall text at the exhibition's entrance, above the feedback forms returns slot, and printed at the bottom of every audience feedback card.

SOUTHBANK CENTRE
FRI 1 NOV – SUN 15 DEC
FREE

NO COMMENT

Curated by Jeremy Deller & John Costi
Unlocking the talent inside the criminal justice system

Koestler Arts, the UK's leading prison arts charity, and the Southbank Centre are proud to welcome you to No Comment – their 17th exhibition of art created in criminal justice settings.

The artworks you see today have been selected from nearly 7,500 entries into the 2024 Koestler Awards. This is a unique annual programme that encourages people in secure settings including prisons, secure hospitals, secure children's homes and immigration removal centres, as well as those on probation, community sentences and youth offending teams, to participate in the arts.

This year, we invited Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller and former prisoner-turned-artist John Costi to co-curate the exhibition. Both artists have a long-standing relationship with Koestler Arts: Deller has supported the charity as an Awards judge for over 15 years, giving prizes to, and writing feedback for, artworks entered into the programme; while Costi started as an award-winning entrant before becoming a mentee, scholar, member of staff, Awards judge and now curator. The two first connected in 2013 when Deller worked with the British Council to issue six cultural scholarships for artists with lived experience of prison to travel and visit his exhibition at the 55th Biennale di Venezia. Costi was one of those artists. In Venice, the pair developed a rapport talking about their work and shared approach to art, which is reflected in the collaborative aspect of the curation.

Deller and Costi invited six guests to choose a selection of artworks to be on display among their own selections: Abbas Zahedi, Andrea Emelle, Larry Achiampong, Dr Nicholas Cullinan OBE, Jonny Banger and Zakia Sewell. As creatives with different roles in the art world, the guests brought in different viewpoints and choices of artworks to the exhibition. To celebrate their curatorial approach and their guests' involvement, Deller and Costi asked Koestler Awards entrants to create portraits of each curator and guest involved. A selection of these portraits are on display in the entrance of the space and provide a visual representation of the collaborative aspect of the exhibition. Asking entrants to create portraits also provided an additional opportunity for artists to be creative, and was a task that could be completed in a cell with minimal art supplies.

Both Deller and Costi's involvement with Koestler Arts and work in the criminal justice sector is reflected in the design of the exhibition. The exhibition begins with artworks that reflect the title of the exhibition, No Comment. In their different ways, the artworks touch upon the idea of experiencing a lack of voice and finding a way to overcome this in a challenging environment.

From there, visitors encounter artworks that focus on the realities of life in prison before seeing a smaller section of artworks that celebrate finding art and the role art classes and education can play, which Deller has contributed to over the years by giving workshops and talks in secure settings. Here, visitors can also read about Costi's own experience of engaging in art programmes while in prison, and the impact this had on him.

Finally, the largest section of the space is given to artworks that reflect the freedom of expression that comes with engaging with the arts, and celebrate the boundlessness of the imagination. Therefore, as you move through the exhibition you follow a representative journey: from feeling restricted and voiceless to finding a sense of freedom beyond the environment through creativity, a journey Deller has seen and one that Costi has lived.

Please do not touch the artworks unless specified. CCTV is in use throughout the exhibition space.

This exhibition contains content that some might find upsetting, including references to violence and drug use, and strong language.

If you'd like to hear more from Koestler Arts, please sign up to our mailing list using the QR code below.

Opening times
Mon: 10am – 5.30pm
Tue & Wed: 10am – 6pm
Thu: 10am – 5pm (late opening until 8pm on Thu 12 Dec)
Fri – Sun: 10am – 6pm
The exhibition is closed on Wednesday 13 and Monday 18 November.

Exhibition supported by
Elysium Healthcare
sodexo QUALITY OF LIFE SERVICE
serco

Visitors' Choice Awards supported by
Wates

The work of Koestler Arts is supported by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND
phf Paul Hamlyn Foundation
HM Prison & Probation Service

Both exhibitions were publicised in the **Koestler Arts monthly newsletter** delivered to 5,000+ subscribers in October 2024, with Wates' support mentioned.

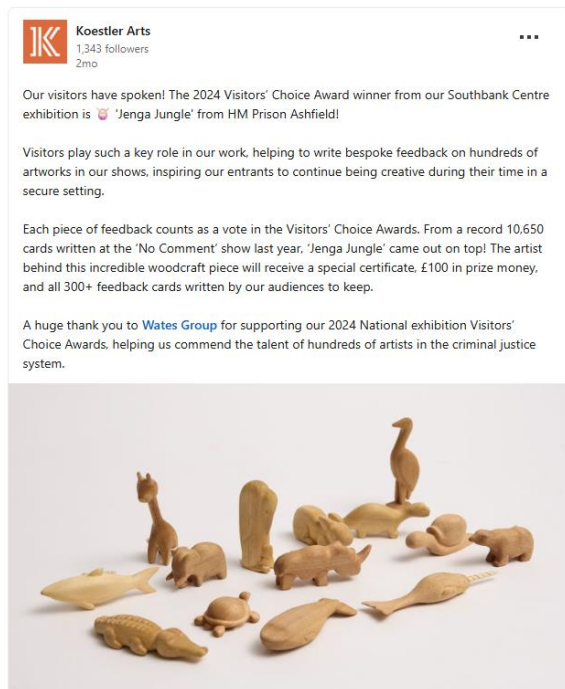
We hope you get the opportunity to visit and engage with the show, and don't forget to get involved in this year's Visitors' Choice Awards, which is kindly supported by **Wates Group**. Just write feedback for your favourite piece in the exhibition and post it in the feedback box to cast your vote!

We would like to use this opportunity to thank our partners, the Southbank Centre, and our Corporate supporters who make this exhibition possible.

Exhibition supported by:
serco **sodexo** **Elysium Healthcare** **Wates**

Visitors' Choice Awards supported by:
Wates

Screenshot from Koestler Arts' October 2024 newsletter



Screenshot from Koestler Arts' LinkedIn, posted March 2025



Screenshot from Koestler Arts' LinkedIn, posted Nov 2024

Wates' support for the Visitor's Choice Awards was widely credited on all Koestler Arts' online platforms. Posts thanking Wates for their support were also shared on all four of Koestler Arts' social media platforms: **Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter), and LinkedIn.** The Koestler Arts website credited Wates in supporting the Visitor's Choice Awards for 'Almost Home' at the Baltic Centre of Contemporary Art.



Screenshot from Koestler Arts' Instagram, posted Nov 2024

Acknowledgements

This exhibition is possible thanks to all the individuals and organisations that support the work of Koestler Arts.

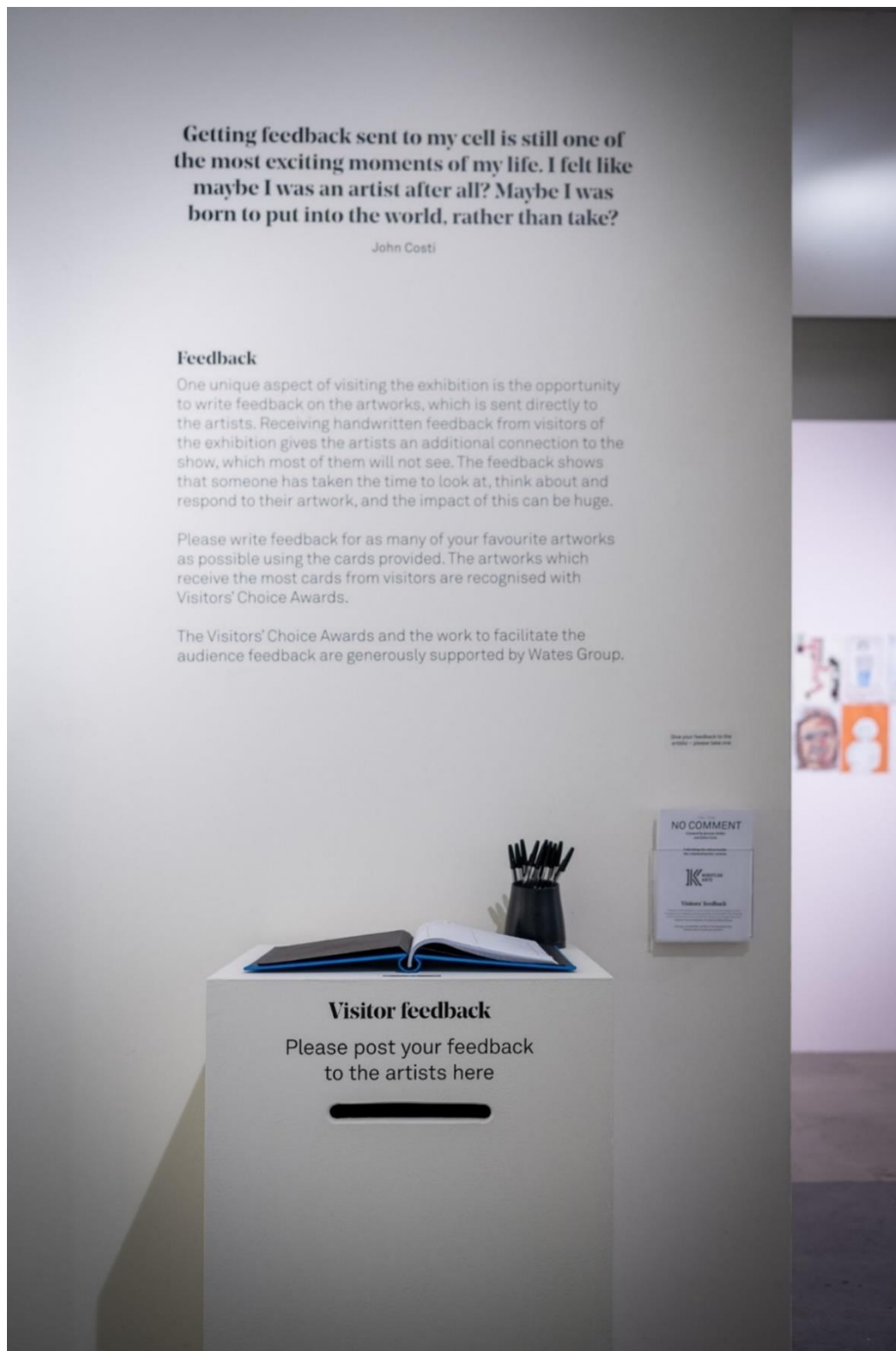
Thank you to our partners at **Baltic** for hosting the show and to **HM Prison and Young Offender Institution Low Newton** for taking part in the curation project and **Junction 42** for facilitating the curation sessions. Additional thanks to all the **Arts Societies in the North East** that kindly supported the show: Driffeld Wolds, Ebor, Leeds, Nidd Valley, Halifax, Harrogate and Saltaire.

Our exhibition Friends and Family days are funded by **Doughty Street Chambers** and the **Michael Varah Memorial Fund**, and our **Visitors' Choice Awards** are supported by **Wates Group**.

Special thanks to our main funders: **Arts Council England**, **HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS)**, and **Paul Hamlyn Foundation**. Our work is made possible by generous Charitable Trusts and Foundations, our Corporate partners, and our dedicated donor groups the **Koestler Patrons** and **Koestler Friends**.



Screenshot from Koestler Arts' website,
<https://koestlerarts.org.uk/exhibitions/almost-home/>



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Unlock the talent inside



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



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