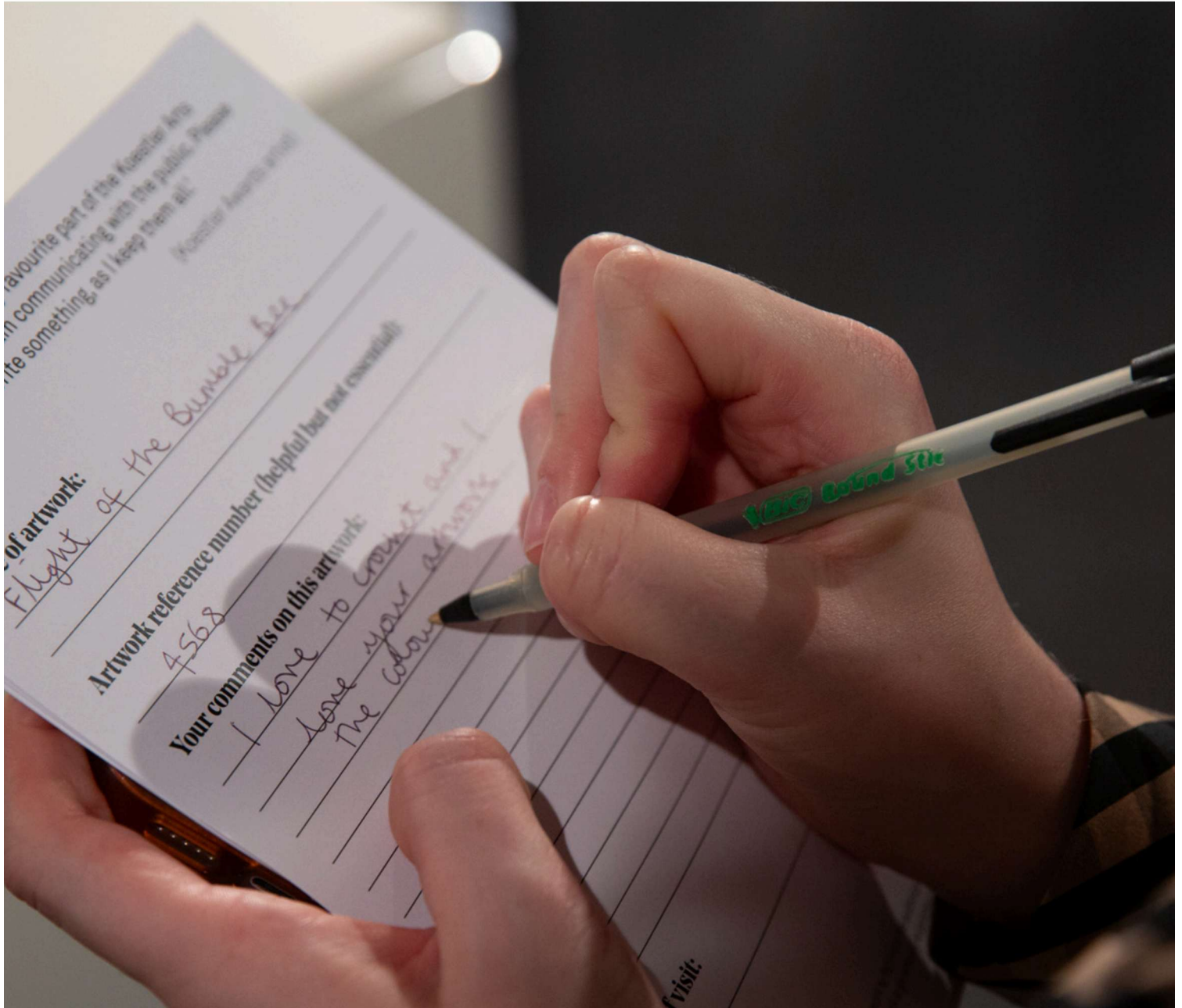


Wates Group & Koestler Arts Visitors' Choice Awards 2025/26 Report



Your support this year

In November 2025, Wates Group donated £10,000 to support the Koestler Arts Visitors' Choice Awards at our national and regional showcases throughout the 2025 - 26 financial year.

Thanks to Wates Group's generous support, we were able to run our Audience Feedback project and the Visitors' Choice Awards at both the annual UK exhibition 'Night Owls and Abstractions' at the Southbank Centre, and our regional exhibition 'Through the Blue' at the Old Fire Station, Oxford.

Designing and printing the feedback cards	1 week
Installing the cards in the exhibition space	1 day
Feedback cards replenished throughout the exhibition's run	6 weeks
Return all the cards to the Koestler Arts Centre	1 week
Sorting the feedback cards	1 month
Reading all the feedback	1 week
Scanning and counting the feedback cards	1 week
Printing an exhibition booklet with the Visitors' Choice Award results	2 weeks
Posting the feedback cards out to artists	2 weeks

Wates Group's support allowed us to print thousands of Audience Feedback cards and distribute them at our exhibitions for the public to fill out. Each card, containing personal handwritten feedback on an exhibited artwork, was returned to artists in secure settings across the country.

Filling out the cards gives visitors extra motivation to spend more time with each work, to think about them critically and reflect on the emotion each work evoked, ultimately improving their viewing experience.

The completed Audience Feedback cards were counted up, with the four artworks with the most cards winning the Visitors' Choice Awards. We also gave visitors the opportunity to vote for their favourite artwork digitally by scanning a QR code on the wall. Winning artworks were awarded special Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze Awards, with artists receiving bespoke certificates and a cash prize (£100, £60, £40 and £20) alongside the feedback cards.

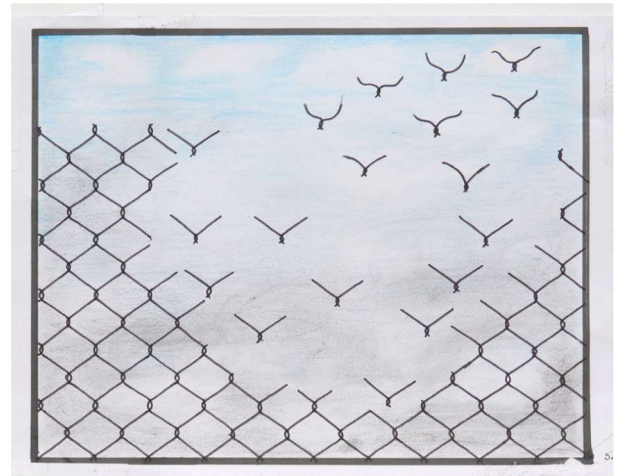


Impact

Koestler Arts provides a rare opportunity to foster connection between people in secure settings and the wider public, helping to build communities that support rehabilitation. Through our exhibitions and audience feedback opportunities, audiences directly encounter work made within the criminal justice system in established cultural spaces, creating opportunities to engage with the work on its own terms. This can spark conversations between “inside” and “outside”, challenging stereotypes and reducing stigma.

Every year I come I learn something deeply meaningful about our society, in which some people incarcerate others.

Exhibition visitor, 2025



Beautiful, powerful, evocative, brilliant, moving.

Exhibition visitor, 2025

Participants consistently describe the value of feedback and recognition as the most important part of their experience entering the Koestler Awards. Many highlight the importance of being seen as an artist rather than through the label of prisoner, helping build routes beyond a crime-based identity.

It makes me smile! Gives me a sense of achievement, a sense of worth. I love getting feedback and criticism.

Entrant to the 2025 Awards

Receiving bespoke, personalized feedback from members of the public can make a real difference to our entrants' confidence and self-esteem, often encouraging them to continue engaging with art. Creative activity behind bars is often described as a way of managing the pressures of life in custody, providing a constructive focus for their time and expressing thoughts and experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken.

It makes me feel heard and I feel like my negative emotions are made into something positive.

Entrant to the 2025 Awards



Night Owls and Abstractions

31 October - 14 December 2025

Southbank Centre, London

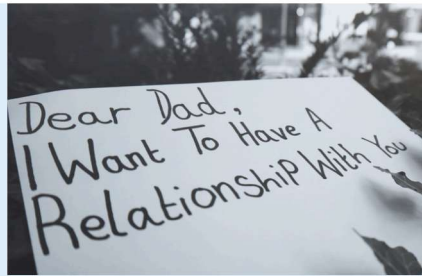
Our 18th Annual National Exhibition, curated by Inua Ellams, allowed us to celebrate artworks from secure settings across the UK with the public. Over the course of the exhibition, a total of 6609 audience feedback cards were produced by visitors.



Platinum

Where Dreams Have Flown

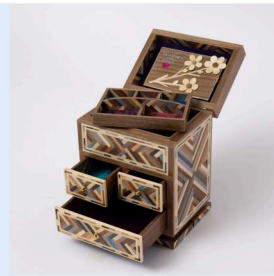
HM Prison Bure,
Themed Category:
Wings



Gold

Dear Dad

Greenwich Youth Justice
Service, Fast Feedback Highly
Commended Award for
Photography



Silver

Trinket Box

HM Prison Wymott,
Gold Award for
Woodcraft



Bronze

Questions

HM Prison and Young
Offenders Institution
Chelmsford,
Outstanding Debut
Award for Poem

Through the Blue

29 January - 14 March

Old Fire Station, Oxford

Our regional exhibition Through the Blue showcased artwork, music, and writing created within criminal justice settings across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, and Surrey, all submitted to the 2025 Koestler Awards. The exhibition was co-curated by people on probation in Oxford and Reading, who reviewed more than 600 pieces made by individuals in prisons, young offender institutions, secure hospitals, and on probation throughout the region, ultimately selecting around 70 works for display.

A total of 444 feedback cards were written by visitors to Through the Blue. There was a draw for the 3rd and 4th most voted for works, so we awarded two Silver Awards this year.



Platinum

Wings

HM Prison Grendon,
Commended Award for
Themed Category:
Wings



Gold

Love Birds

HM Prison Grendon, Arts
Society Beaconsfield Gold
Award for Printmaking



Silver

One Daisy for Each Year of a Life Sentence

HM Prison
Downview, Highly
Commended Award
for Needlecraft



Silver

The Darkest Hour

HM Prison Woodhill
Pastel

Our partnership in 2025

Koestler Arts were delighted to welcome Eoghan O'Lionaird, Phil Shortman, Tracy Tyson and other Wates colleagues to the private view of 'Night Owls and Abstractions' at the Southbank Centre. We were pleased to introduce them to James McEwen, the new CEO at HMPPS, who officially opened the exhibition.



Feedback


One unique aspect of visiting the exhibition is the opportunity to write feedback on the artworks, which is sent directly to the artists. Receiving handwritten feedback from visitors of the exhibition gives the artists an additional connection to the show, which most of them will not see. The feedback shows that someone has taken the time to look at, think about and respond to their artwork, and the impact of this can be huge.

Please write feedback for as many of the artworks that speak to you as possible using the cards provided.


Visitors' Choice Awards

Every year, we give visitors the opportunity to vote for their favourite artwork, giving it a chance to win a special Visitors' Choice Award. There are four awards available – Platinum, Gold, Silver and Bronze – and each comes with a small monetary prize. Awards are shown to increase an artist's level of confidence and self-worth. The artworks which receive the most votes from visitors will be recognised with an award.

Please use the QR code to vote



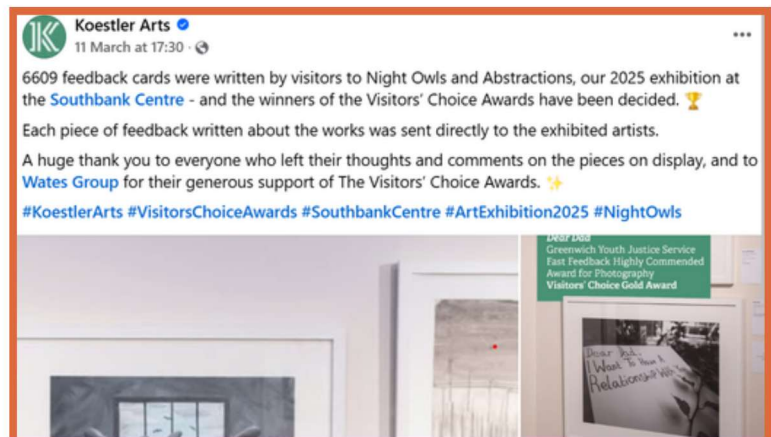
The Visitors' Choice Awards and the work to facilitate the audience feedback are generously supported by Wates Group.



Visitor feedback


The 2025 Visitors' Choice Awards at both 'Night Owls and Abstractions' and 'Through the Blue' were widely promoted online and onsite, with Wates' support clearly acknowledged across all platforms. During each exhibition, Wates' contribution was prominently credited: the brand name and/or logo appeared on the entrance wall text, above the feedback form returns slot, and on every audience feedback card.

We acknowledged Wates Group's generous support on our website, our newsletter, and on our Facebook and Instagram, reaching over 1.4k viewers:



Koestler Arts' Facebook, posted March 2026

Visitors' Choice Awards - the results are in!



Every time we exhibit work, we invite visitors to leave written feedback for the works that move them most - and those responses count as votes towards our Visitors' Choice Awards.

It's one of our favourite parts of the exhibition process: a direct link between the artists who made something extraordinary, and the people that were moved by their work.

We're delighted to announce this year's winners from *Night Owls and Abstractions* - congratulations to the artists, and thank you to all who voted!

[See the winners here](#)

The Visitor's Choice Awards are generously supported by Wates Group.

Feedback is consistently highlighted by our entrants as one of the most valuable things they receive from the Awards process. This year, we're doing things slightly differently - feedback cards will be available for you to send direct comments to any creatives featured in the exhibition.

A separate QR code will also be available for you to vote for which piece you would like to win a Visitors' Choice Award, kindly supported by Wates Group.

Exhibition supported by:

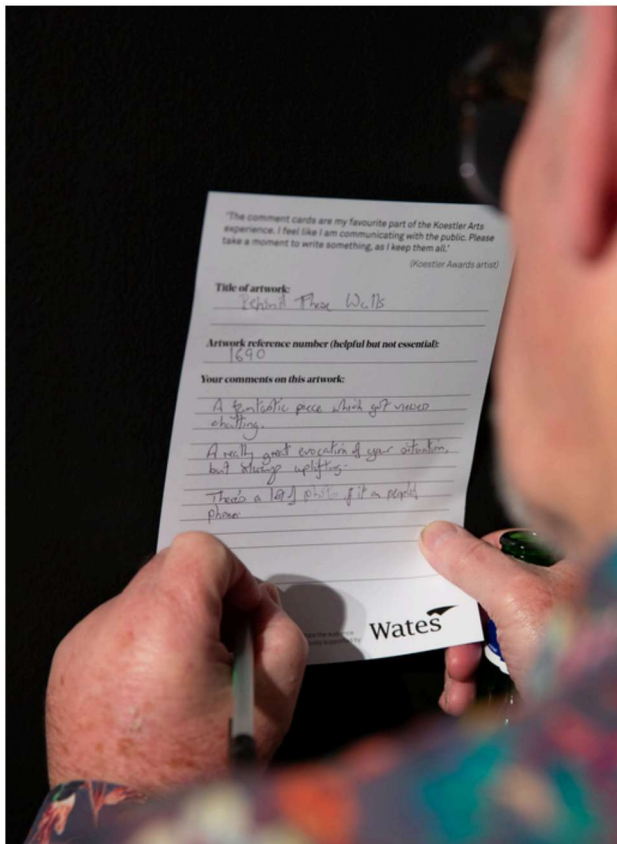


Visitors' Choice Awards supported by:

Acknowledgements and thanks

Thank you to everyone at Wates for helping us provide encouragement, confidence and connection to thousands of people in prisons and other secure settings.

We were delighted to share the results of the 2025 Visitors' Choice Awards in this report, and we look forward to building on this meaningful partnership in 2026.



“Showing a personal creation is always daunting, but receiving such positive, heart-warming and encouraging feedback can be a huge tonic for a prisoner. It makes the hard work valid, knowing I haven't misused my time spent inside. It allows me to fly briefly, to rekindle memories and feelings of better times, and to feel human again.”

Artist exhibited in 'Night Owls and Abstractions', 2025

Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or comments about our partnership or Koestler Arts' wider work.

Simon Scott | Director of Development

simon@koestlerarts.org.uk

T: 0208 740 0333

Koestler Arts, 170 Du Cane Road, London W12 0TX

Unlock the talent inside



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



'Koestler Arts' is the working name of the 'Koestler Trust'. The Koestler Trust is a registered charity in England and Wales no. 1105759. Company limited by guarantee no. 4961363. Registered office as above.