

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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IKON LAUNCHES SLOW BOAT 2026: YOUNG PEOPLE CHART A NEW CREATIVE ROUTE THROUGH THE WEST MIDLANDS



Members of Ikon Youth Programme aboard Slow Boat
© Ikon.

Ikon is excited to launch **Slow Boat 2026**, the gallery's annual floating arts studio and residency space supported by Freelands Foundation. Travelling over 150 miles of the West Midlands canal network, Slow Boat hosts free workshops, conversations and creative collaborations with young people, communities and contemporary artists.

The Slow Boat route has been designed by members of **Ikon Youth Programme (IYP)** - emerging artists, curators, musicians, writers and creatives aged 16–21. Inspired by the Victorian craft traditions and post-war design innovation of the region's art school heritage, the 2026 programme explores themes of heritage, place and shared creativity.

Wherever it docks, Slow Boat becomes a temporary studio – a space for experimentation, risk-taking and making. Workshops are **free for young people**, with opportunities to learn from contemporary artists, while exploring local histories and co-curating creative projects.

2026 Route and Dates

Wolverhampton

1 April – 1 May

Starting the journey by exploring the city's long-standing craft and design education traditions.

Tipton

11 May – 24 May

Workshops draw on Tipton's industrial heritage and its communities of makers.

Stourbridge

1 – 13 June

Reflecting the region's glassmaking history, participants investigate materiality and making in new ways.

Halesowen

22 June – 4 July

Young artists invite local groups to create collaborative artworks inspired by Halesowen's landscapes and stories.

Smethwick

11 – 19 July

In partnership with the Canal & River Trust, Slow Boat hosts the *Smethwick Imaginarium: Linking Art and Nature*, celebrating connections between creativity and the natural world.

Birmingham

27 July – 30 August

A central-city stop celebrating Birmingham's art school legacy with a full programme of workshops and events.

Coventry

7 – 26 September

The journey concludes in Coventry, a city shaped by reinvention and community-led creativity.

Our Floating Studio: A Making Space for Young People

At every stop, Slow Boat becomes a temporary creative space, a slow studio, a canal lab for young people to experiment, learn and make..

Workshops focus on:

- drawing and painting
- sculpture and installation
- sound, film and digital media
- collaborative projects with local artists
- nature-inspired sessions delivered with partners

New IYP Coordinator: Lucy Grubb

“I’m excited to return to Ikon, where I was part of IYP between 2019–2021, before joining the gallery as an Information Assistant. Coming back feels like a full circle moment.

Over the next twelve months I’m incredibly excited to co-curate this programme with IYP – embedding our language, our dreams, and our practices into the pre-existing structures of the Slow Boat, IYP and Ikon.

IYP is a collective of emerging creatives whose voices matter. Slow Boat offers a space where young voices can be seen and heard, where experimentation is possible and where we can reclaim the materials, stories and languages that shape who we are. It’s a testament to what can happen when young people are trusted, supported and given room to grow.”

Get Involved

Slow Boat workshops are **free** for young people aged 16–21. Booking links will be published ahead of each stop on Ikon’s website and social media channels.

Slow Boat and Ikon Youth Programme (IYP) are generously supported by Freelands Foundation.



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Press enquiries, interviews and high-res images: press@ikon-gallery.org or call Ikon on 0121 248 0708.

Social Media: @ikongallery #IkonGallery @ace_national @aceagrams @ace_midlands

Notes to editors

1. **Ikon Gallery**, 1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS. 0121 248 0708 / ikon-gallery.org Open Tuesday-Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am-5pm. Free entry, donations welcome. Ikon Gallery Limited trading as Ikon. Registered charity no. 528892.
2. **Ikon** is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art gallery, situated in Birmingham's city centre. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2024. It is an educational charity with free entry for all and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Ikon aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art.
3. **Ikon Shop** is Birmingham's only specialist art bookshop, stocking a range of books, cards, artists' limited editions, magazines and gifts. All profits from Ikon Shop support Ikon Gallery's charitable artistic and educational programme. shop.ikon-gallery.org
4. **Ikon** is supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, and Birmingham City Council.
5. **Arts Council England** is the national development agency for creativity and culture. ACE have set out their strategic vision in *Let's Create* that by 2030 they want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. From 2023 to 2026 ACE will invest over £467 million of public money from Government and an estimated £250 million from The National Lottery each year to help to deliver this vision. artscouncil.org.uk

6. **Freelands Foundation** believes in the intrinsic value of art and that making is fundamental. Its vision is to increase the status of art education, enable equality of access and promote material literacy.

The Foundation supports this important work in formal education settings, in galleries and art organisations, and by learning through artistic practice. Its charitable programme provides vital funding through grants, awards, fellowships and residencies.

It also commissions innovative action research to inform the Foundation's future support and to help make progress across the sector.

At the Foundation's home in London, as well as online, there is a programme of lively discussions, workshops and events for teachers, artists, gallery and art professionals, alongside a growing a library of inspiring art education resources.
freelandsfoundation.co.uk