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A New Direction's Listening Project: Creative Practice

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1. Background

A New Direction is a London-based non-profit, generating opportunities for children and young people to unlock their creativity. B&G LLP was one of five organisations commissioned in January 2021 by A New Direction to conduct one of its five Listening Projects to learn from those who have been working with children and young people through the pandemic. Our enquiry focused on creative practice.

We presented our Listening Project as an opportunity for practitioners and organisations to help reshape cultural and creative policy and practice for young people in London from early years to young adulthood, out of their experiences of the health crisis. We already knew that children and young people are one of the groups in London that have been most affected by it. We wanted to find out more about the impact on them, how those in the sector have responded and how their work has changed as a result. We wanted to know how far these changes might be permanent and what the future might hold for young people in London and those that work with them. Finally, we asked people what they thought needed to change in the sector in order for it to move forward.

About us

B&G is a partnership founded by Ben Payne and Gerald Richards, based in London and Edinburgh. We provide consultancy services, workshops and training, and coaching for those in the creative and cultural sectors.

Between us, we have over 50 years of professional experience in the performing arts, writing and literature and the education, youth and voluntary sectors in the US and UK.

We help individuals and organisations be more creative, confident and tell a better story about what they do.

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2. Methodology

In February 2021, we conducted one-to-one interviews with 16 people, drawn from across the artforms from different parts of London and different cultural backgrounds, working with a range of age groups of young people in a variety of settings: from those working directly with schools to those delivering out of school programmes; from those supporting the development of young creative professionals and those working with families, very young children and in the community. We talked to individual freelance practitioners, those running small organisations and those in larger institutions. We also heard from those with many years of experience in the sector and from those nearer the start of their careers. The age range of young people that were the subjects of this enquiry was also the broadest: from early years right up to 25. Where the upper limit of this should be, in the context of the extended impact that the crisis is likely to have on young Londoners, also emerged as a topic of debate in itself.

We also facilitated two roundtable conversations open to anyone with a stake in our subject and who wanted to contribute to the debate. These discussions also brought together a wide range of people who appreciated the opportunity to connect and share their experiences with others, as well as address the questions that we had for them. 20 people took part in these roundtables, with 22 people also completing an online introductory survey about their work with young people in London prior to being interviewed or taking part in a roundtable. Three of these people who completed the survey were ultimately unable to join one of the roundtables or to be interviewed.

The turnaround time on this research was very tight: just over a month from start to finish. We were conscious that many people who might have liked to participate or contribute were not able to due to these limitations or the continuing challenges of working in the pandemic. With a longer timeframe, we would have wanted to go back out to our original respondents and to a wider group of people to test out our findings and the recommendations that emerged.

Instead, we identified five broad themes - **Acceleration, Innovation, Equity, Community** and **The Future** which helped to give a shape to what we heard. We have illustrated these by including some of the voices of those we talked to. We have then summarised the recommendations from the conversations at the end of the report.

We are extremely grateful to those people who gave us the time and benefit of their experience to engage with us and our questions. We are particularly grateful to the team at A New Direction and the coordinators of five of London's Cultural Education Partnerships: in **Camden, Barking and Dagenham, the City of London, Barnet** and **Wandsworth**, as well as **LEAN**, the network for arts education in Lewisham who helped us to connect with people in pursuit of this enquiry.

3. Introduction

“Overall, this is a period which despite being catastrophic in the short term will make many great changes in how the world works” - Anna, aged 11, London¹

A year ago this week, the Prime Minister announced that he was shaking hands with patients with coronavirus. A year ago, terms such as “social distancing”, “lockdown”, “furlough” or “support bubbles” that are now the common currency of our lives would have sounded like alien concepts. Covid-19 has caused extraordinary disruption to the way we live, how we interact with each other and how we work. Its effects, particularly for young people, will be enduring.

A year ago, Arts Council England was planning the implementation of *Let's Create*², its 10 year strategy for arts and culture in England, and to build into it the findings of the Durham Commission³ that re-examined the role of creative education and how it might contribute to the development of young people. Yet, when the pandemic struck, instead of this plan, the Arts Council, the DCMS (Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport) and other key funders had to rush to shore up a sector that was immediately affected by the first lockdown, which has continued to struggle since and will likely be one of the last to reset to some kind of normality. A DCMS report in 2020 noted:

“The Covid-19 Crisis presents the biggest threat to the UK’s cultural infrastructure, institutions and workforce in a generation. The loss of performing arts institutions and the vital work they do in the communities by spreading the health and education benefits of cultural engagement would undermine the aims of the Government’s “levelling up agenda” and the Arts Council’s 10 year strategy and reverse decades of progress in diversity and inclusion that we cannot afford to lose.”⁴

To this, we could add that the pandemic has also exposed existing deep-seated inequalities in how young people are able to access the cultural provision available in London and in how those from the diverse backgrounds that make up the city can build careers in a sector that is so fundamental to both the economy of London and its life. Young people’s lives and development have been put on hold for a year in an unprecedented way and we still don’t know what the permanent effects of this will be on them or on the sector. In an already seismic year, it’s also clear that the murder of George Floyd and the globalisation of the Black Lives Matter movement has had as much effect as Covid on many young Londoners. The effect on the people and cultural organisations that serve them also has been seismic. Many organisations have had to rethink their entire business models to survive, workers have been furloughed or made redundant and freelancers’ livelihoods have shrunk, if not been wiped out completely.

¹ *“Everything is Changing”, Young People’s Thoughts on Coronavirus*, Fevered Sleep, 2020

² *“Let’s Create” Arts Council England’s 10 Year Strategy*, 2020

³ Durham Commission Report on Creativity and Education, 2019

⁴ HMP “The Impact of Covid 19 on DCMS Sectors, First Report, 2020, p.51

This report should be read as a snapshot of the perspectives of those in the sector at a pivotal moment between the most recent lockdown and the new plan for reopening, as we enter the Spring of 2021.

Many working in this sector feel, like young people, disempowered and disconnected from each other and from the key decisions that affect them. Yet through this enquiry, we have also seen a desire to connect, to help and support each other and to find new and positive ways to respond and build back. How then can we learn from the experiences of the last year and build on this impetus and solidarity to create the change we need?

4. Themes

Theme 1: Acceleration

The immediate impacts of the disruption caused by the pandemic a year ago are still fresh in the minds of many of those we spoke to for this enquiry. Within the creative education sector, we remember how the initial weeks of lockdown created havoc both in the planned programmes of work and organisational teams. One freelancer described having all eight projects in her busy year ahead cancelled pretty much at a stroke. This experience was also reflected by others in other parts of the sector. Whilst one organisation was able to honour 90% of the contracts it had with freelancers, for one freelancer, none of her contracts were, even though she had already signed some of them. Work based on going into schools or face-to-face interaction with young people was hit immediately and hit hardest, leaving many in both creative and financial limbo, struggling to find immediate solutions. An artistic director also recalls:

“We absolutely rely on teachers as our co-creators in every story that we make with children and, in those first few weeks of lockdown, teachers were just flat out scrambling to work out what all this meant. Even so, we had teachers cycling around their own neighbourhoods to drop off our work to entire classes because some children weren't online or they just hadn't heard from them. I remember feeling very defensive of teachers then when they were getting stick for supposedly not doing anything or not wanting to go back into schools.”

Some organisations were more willing and able to make an early, speedy leap to digital, but many questioned the quality of what was produced in the initial rush and whether it was really what young people needed. We also heard many examples of creative organisations in London rapidly rethinking their activities and their creative approach, developing partnerships to meet the immediate needs of local young people, their families and communities. One example of this was BACs Create and Learn Playkits⁵ which were made and delivered through work with local voluntary organisations.

There is clearly a desire that the kinds of relationships and alliances that were forged through this work last beyond the crisis which had brought them about. Against this sense of “all hands on the deck”, however, some organisations also had to rapidly adapt to the unprecedented impact on staffing levels and capacity to deliver their work with young people over the same period. For one organisation at one point, all members of staff were

⁵ <https://bac.org.uk/create-with-us/create-learn-playkits/>

furloughed apart from the CEO who was also an Interim Maternity Cover. A manager in the organisation commented:

“... and I didn't have the capacity to run a creative programme or do the pastoral care for young people and if you don't have that you're in danger of doing a disservice to those young people, to yourself and to the organisation.”

Though the challenges were many and undeniable, we also heard more positive stories of the ways in which the impact of Covid-19 has also accelerated change and created new opportunities for those working within larger organisations and for individual practitioners. For the former, this has been made possible by support and buy-in from those at the top of the organisation. As one Head of Department with responsibility for young people's engagement in an institution put it:

“I've actually learned more about leading and leading young people's programmes in the last year than I have in the past five. In the last year, I have got better at being more responsive to young people and this has proved to me that I can do it more in an organisation that is really willing to flex and change.”

It was her reflection that the need to adapt to the crisis presented ways to creatively rethink the organisation's work such that young people could be genuinely put at the core of it, instead of it feeling like an adjunct. The shift to digital meant that its programmes were actually more attuned to how young people would most readily engage with them. One outcome of this was that one of the creative skills programmes⁶ for young people that might have been expected to engage an audience of several thousand in normal times at most, actually reached 80,000. Such success only increases the momentum and appetite for change. But how easy is it to gauge the impact and engagement when all of that engagement is digital? How easy is it to provide genuine choice to young people in how they engage?

The V&A Museum of Childhood would have been going through a significant period of change anyway, due to its originally planned closure period that was then brought forward by the pandemic and which will now be affected by the restructuring of the entire V&A operation that has since come in its wake. Nevertheless, the creative education team at the MoC has used this closure period to reflect and dig deeper in how to change its programmes so that they are more co-created with and responsive to young people.⁷ In these ways, the pandemic has increased the ability of some institutions to reach more young people, to find creative ways to bring young creative practitioners more into the centre of them, and to activate strategies that might in normal times have taken much longer to implement.

This has been a similar experience for individual adult practitioners and smaller organisations. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic accelerated the learning of techniques to make socially distanced facilitation and practice work, simply because there was no other choice. Alongside this, many people noted how there were also further strategic benefits to this way of working:

⁶ <https://www.somersetshouse.org.uk/whats-on/upgrade-yourself-online>

⁷ <https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/transforming-the-va-museum-of-childhood>

"I used to spend an insane amount of my time travelling for work and I realise a lot of my creative time was actually taking place in my own, unpaid time. Now, meetings that I am not being paid for can happen online and I will stick to this from now on. Because of Zoom too, where you are in the world no longer really matters. I can now reach 30 local schools with my work which would just not have been possible before. Obviously, you lose a lot without that face-to-face contact, but it has definitely given me new ways to think about, deliver and scale what I do."

One respondent noted how Heart N Soul⁸ had grown its engagement with young people with learning disabilities from around 20 regular participants to around 100 for its programmes by delivering them digitally. Others reflected on how they were more able to engage with teachers, with other practitioners and partners both across London and the country in ways that were far more efficient and sustainable than previously thought and that they would preserve much in this way of working even when the pandemic passed.

There has also been acceleration in the creative economy. We heard how the change in the nature of work and the way it is funded is having its own particular impact on practitioners. Someone with over 30 years of experience in the creative sector, primarily with young people, in the community and disadvantaged groups reported:

"I've been pushed out of arts practice recently through the necessity to work. The type of work I do as an arts practitioner has shifted over time from freelancer to employee, having to adapt my practice along the way. Starting as a dance and drama performer, then moving into facilitating participatory workshops and training. Most recently, as a direct result of the pandemic, shifting across the voluntary sector to become a social prescribing officer working with community groups."

Last Summer, we also saw how rapidly funding systems were able to respond when they needed to, getting money out swiftly to those that needed immediate support and bypassing bureaucratic processes. One grant manager openly reflected at the time on whether this change should become permanent and if the arts funding system could be made quicker, more efficient and genuinely supportive as a result of how it had responded to the crisis. Some of the Local Cultural Education Partnerships in London also drew attention to how the enforced pause to normal ways of working has enabled more strategic discussions to take place between different agencies and partners with a stake in how the cultural sector works with schools and young people, addressing the tendency to work in silos or to feel like lots of local activity and energy was being duplicated, dispersed or missed.

By the Autumn, many saw how teachers and schools were now more able to engage again with artists and the cultural sector, to define what they needed and that the equipment and techniques needed for working online were more apparent. However, it is clear from our conversations that the more recent national lockdown has had a real impact on young people's ability to engage, with many reporting lethargy arising from this extended period of disruption and disconnection, greater impact on young people's mental health, more issues at home and in the family. There are also increased anxieties about the future and how the

⁸ <https://www.heartnsoul.co.uk/whatson>

return to normal can actually be normal in any way for a long time to come. Creative organisations and people seem similarly exhausted by the constant need to rethink their plans, to adapt their creative practice and work out the ways to sustain themselves. Covid-19 has accelerated all the existing problems of austerity, inequality and uncertainty and deepened all the issues related to this for young people and creative organisations alike. With the coming of the return to schools and the possible end to the current lockdown, now seems like a good time to pause, take stock and ask what the sector really needs. What do the children and young people that we work with really need now?

Theme 2: Innovation

The challenge to creative practice with children and young people presented by the pandemic in London created the potential for new solutions and inspired changes to the ways of working that may well become permanent even when there is a return to normal. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that at least one organisation which had just found a permanent home in a London borough could not make any new work at all for the first six months, due to a mixture of their own personal circumstances and the need to properly process the implications of what had happened: whether existing projects could really be rethought at all or would have to be scrapped entirely. Another respondent also identified what she saw as an unhealthy competition amongst those in her sector to come up with the “best” way to support children and young people creatively and educationally. Others commented on how far the demands of being able to still deliver and engage with the young people had taken them away from their original practice:

“At the moment, we’re making something more like interactive TV than theatre ...”

When discussing innovation, it was natural for respondents to talk about online work and we heard great examples of how even the most collaborative, participative practice was still made possible through simple, yet innovative approaches.⁹ Yet, some of the most interesting creative experiments through this period may have been the ones that attempted to maintain the live connection, despite the restrictions of lockdown. Instead of going online, for example, a community music organisation in Haringey opted to create a way for local musicians to connect with local young people and residents in the eight streets immediately adjacent to the company’s home, building on the weekly “clap for carers” event.¹⁰

“We Are Still Here” had the advantage that some of these local connections and partnerships, to some extent, already existed from the previous work of the organisation. What is also notable is that the impact of this particular experiment has already been captured and assessed by an evaluator. This highlights the importance of being able to understand the innovations that have worked well under these peculiar circumstances, to learn from them and share them more widely and of what meaningful public engagement looks like when the circumstances around it have been so prescribed. Another project¹¹ by the same organisation, a programme that had been running for several years before, but

⁹ <https://grandjunction.org.uk/category/community-banter/>

¹⁰ <https://groundswellarts.com/wearehere/>

¹¹ <https://groundswellarts.com/projects/sing-our-story/>

which had previously been delivered through schools, was reformatted to be delivered online and, as schools were not at that point able to engage, was delivered digitally straight into family homes instead. The results of this were manifold. The project quickly demonstrated its benefits, particularly for marginalised families with children locked down at home. These families began to directly refer the programme to others and to schools themselves. When schools were able to reconnect with the project, they also saw the advantages of the direct connection with families, possibly for the first time. Larger partners such as Great Ormond Street Hospital then showed an interest in taking the project further to more families. In this way, the role of families changed the dynamic. That they have potentially more understanding of the benefits of creativity and creative education work with young people from the experience of it in their own homes is one area that merits further investigation. How innovative projects that have demonstrated their value like this and can be helped to scale in order to reach new audiences is another.

For some, innovation has not been so much about doing anything particularly groundbreaking artistically, more about continuing to provide the kind of space that they already know young people need just in different ways. Against the backdrop of other organisations grappling with new ways to respond, one Artistic Director of a London youth theatre commented:

“We knew exactly what to do because it’s what we’ve always done: provide “the third space” for young people that isn’t home and that isn’t school, a space where they can find support, connection and a place to express themselves. We’ve been active throughout the pandemic even though some of the young people actually haven’t performed on a real stage for more than a year. In that time, I must have played over 200 games of Werewolves which actually works brilliantly online. I’m now very good at leading it, still not any good at playing it.”

What this experience has also provided is the conviction that, with the next two years really being about recovery, the company needs to find new ways to grow. There will be a need for more in-depth, long-term support for young people; for the ability to work with smaller groups of young people, as well as the need to expand its programmes to more young people locally and provide physical spaces in which young people can feel safe and over which they can have ownership, because *“if you’re a 14 year old, your real development takes place in direct relationship with other people. They will need a space to process and to reconvene for quite a while to come.”*

The artistic director of another theatre agreed:

“When we’ve been talking to teenagers, there’s an anxiety there about how quickly things can really go back to normal ...” she said. “So it’s about facilitating conversations. They’ve got so used to communicating through Whatsapp and new technology, the art of face-to-face conversation has been lost. One 12 year old said at the end of one of our sessions: “Thank you. I’ve really missed human contact ...” It can’t just be about let’s go back and put on a show. It’ll be support with conversation and social skills and just giving them the opportunity to play again.”

More than one respondent pointed out that these widespread feelings of disconnection, isolation and marginalisation; and of always feeling “responsible” have strong parallels to the

feelings that both young carers and looked after children experience all the time. It could be that creative projects and organisations that already work with and support these groups of young people have much to teach the rest of the sector.

Even those creative organisations whose premise and creative practice often works around the imaginative use of digital have found the last year tough. We heard the long-term Impact on creative practitioners of constantly needing to improvise in the digital space for young people and to adapt their work to the often very different needs of a group and ways they engage. They talked of the pressure from constantly interacting with muted microphones, or with black screens only to get a glimpse of a young person bundled in the far corner of their room, hopefully listening. In some ways, we heard there was also an artistic cost of innovation. One practitioner talked of his feeling of loss of seeing a live theatre project that he had worked on for three years with a teenager being repurposed for YouTube. This way it could become something new and immediate and reach many more young people, but it also became irrevocably something different to that which they had both originally intended.

Theme 3: Equity

“We have to remember that all young people don’t have access to technology or broadband service.”

As London and other cities around the world descended into the first lockdown, the digital inequities became abundantly clear. In a world swimming in wifi and filled with digital devices, we learned that not every person or family had access to these items that many of us consider essential and necessary to function in today’s modern world. The already existing digital divide was exacerbated by lockdown with 1.9 million households in the UK without internet access and 25.9 million people relying on pay-as-you-go services to make phone calls and access essential services such as education, healthcare and benefits. The continuing lockdown and loss of jobs has only served to increase the divide even further leaving families to decide between internet access and food.

Children and young people living in poverty or considered ‘at-risk’ have been hit hardest of all. The lack of internet access combined with a lack of computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones meant families could not engage digitally or had to share these devices, with education and creative pursuits taking a back seat to the needs of a working parent or parents or siblings at different schools. As cultural education organisations moved their services online, many young Londoners were left out, unable to take advantage of the programmes and services they had come to rely on for support and creative growth. One company in Tower Hamlets lost the majority of its Bengali young people as soon as it moved online, leaving primarily the already most artistically engaged and digitally privileged young people. This problem of digital access has been continuously highlighted in research over the last year.¹²

Even when organisations spoke to their young participants about their online access, the answers they were given about access devices at home didn’t sync up with that young

¹² <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/digital-natives-digital-creatives/>

person's reality. A programme coordinator who works with young people in a music programme told us:

"Many young people say they have access and devices but don't and don't want to say because of embarrassment."

The pandemic has also exposed the cultural inequities that exist within at-risk communities. While young people with online access are thriving and taking advantage of the many opportunities that now exist online, those without access are once again being left out and left behind. *"Being online was a great way to collaborate but only six or seven of our young people are taking advantage because the others, they haven't got it."*

"All youth are not coming from the same background or the same experience, one size does not fit all."

Many young people have to share their devices AND their working spaces with other family members, making it hard for them to participate in creative work. The reality of participating in, activities like music and dance, became impossible in smaller and crowded home environments. A music education programme coordinator related:

"Having that safe space of our building was important. A lot of participants would ask to stay for another two or three hours (after a programme) because they had to share their bedroom with two or three older brothers."

The cultural and creative education sectors were already answering calls to diversify and increase the representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, LGBTQ and disabled people in their worlds. The pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and the resulting increased activities of the Black Lives Matter movement have exposed the inequities even further. Even as we heard how some organisations were developing their BLM pledges into active anti-racist plans, pushing forward decolonisation projects with big London institutions despite the challenges of lockdown, we also heard how young Londoners from historically underrepresented communities, already affected by the digital divide, were losing out on online creative education workshops and being deprived of creative education activities. This will result in even less Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, and other underrepresented young people pursuing creative careers or roles in cultural leadership, perpetuating this cycle of lack of representation. One of our roundtable conversation participants, a young man from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community summed it up:

"After the lockdown and post-covid, I feel as a young person, I feel like there will be a lot of catching up to do. With tech we moved really far but in everything else we are still backward. There will be a lot of catching up to do."

The lack of non-white leadership in youth-arts organisations has also become strikingly apparent with one interviewee calling out the "disgraceful lack of representation" in the sector and another pointing to the minuscule number of black-led youth theaters. It will not be enough to diversify the sector - there must also be a concurrent increase in representative staff and leadership to serve as examples and role models for

underrepresented young people interested in careers in the arts and cultural sectors. A staff member at a local arts centre said:

“A huge part of convincing young people of a career in this industry will be mentorship. Providing them partnerships with people like them, young leaders who have been through and learned the hard way how to get ahead. It’s about representation. ‘This lad looks like me, he’s from my area and look at what he is doing’, that kind of aspirational mentorship. So it’s not just organisations telling or schools telling how to do these things but actual physical examples of successful people who are enjoying their lives and their creative careers.”

A senior manager of one cultural organisation also commented, *“when I came into this job, I realised that I had been pushed forward, mentored and encouraged by so many people ... By the time I got here, I had a network, probably of over 200 people with me. We need to be building and providing those networks for more young people from the kinds of diverse backgrounds like mine that don’t already have them.”*

Theme 4: Community

Elsewhere, we noted how the pandemic and its various lockdowns made space for some to reflect on what they were doing in the sector, how they were doing it and why. The impact of the crisis enabled some to notice others more, to learn from each other; and created a desire to keep the connectedness and sense of community and collaboration that emerged. This is particularly the case now that there is more awareness of the range of circumstances that can greatly affect some young people’s ability to participate in cultural programmes: what one respondent called *“the cultural gap that we all knew was there which has actually been shown to be more of a cultural chasm”*. The leader of a London music hub said:

“We ask more questions now. If a young person or a family are moving on from us, where previously we might have seen that just as a decision by them, we’re doing a deeper dig and we are now naturally asking if there is anything we can do that would enable them to continuethere’s also more togetherness with other organisations that might not normally have worked together before. There are a lot of networks which were more about the voluntary sector that didn’t engage with us as a cultural organisation. Our work as a hub has grown and that has got to be a healthy thing. But will these networks of support for young people disband once there’s a return to normality?”

The situation also inspired more connectedness and a desire to create a community of practice around work for young people. One London youth theatre shared the resources from creating its “Coronavirus Time Capsule”¹³ with 215 other companies nationally, reaching over 3,000 more young people in the process. Networks like Participatory Arts London and What Next? also came to the fore, as did the Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPS) with coordinators reporting membership increasing in response to the pandemic.

¹³ <https://thegulbenkian.co.uk/what-we-do/the-coronavirus-time-capsule/>

In response to the disruption of relationships between schools and creative organisations, LCEPs like Camden Spark recognised the virtue of brokering simple “buddying” opportunities for teachers and people within these organisations to connect and talk without the need for this to necessarily lead to anything immediate as an outcome. Other respondents also talked about the need for this as a way of organisations reconnecting with teachers, establishing what schools need and rebuilding supportive creative relationships across the sector. From this, there could be a role for LCEPs in enabling young people through training and support to become local leaders for and commissioners of creative practice in their areas and for local teachers to become cultural education leaders in their school and communities. Camden Spark also identified a need for the primary schools to be able to build up communities of artists and other creative practitioners around them.

“Artsmark will be a priority; we will need to find ways for primary schools to find very local groups of creative people to help them make the most of going through the Artsmark process”

This emphasis on the hyper-local was also seen as one key strategy that could really help young people out of the pandemic: initiatives like A New Direction’s own *Reset Collaboration Plan*¹⁴. There were also calls for greater cultural democracy at the local level, for instance, that every borough should have an organisation that can support some kind of citizen’s assembly for young people and culture. This linked to a crucial point about honouring and supporting what already exists, rather than parachuting in outside projects and organisations to fill the space:

“There are loads of dedicated people running after school clubs, or doing something in their local estate training young people in how to DJ or to play an instrument. I think we should find those people and give them some money, space and support rather than imposing projects on young people from outside. Seek out talent that really understands its local area.”

We also heard how individual freelancers, out of necessity, were creating their own collaborations with practitioners from other artforms or in other fields to help deliver creative work to children and young people together, learning new skills as a result and rediscovering the art of collaboration out of their isolation.

Theme 5: The Future

“Everyone has to be pandemic ready from now on. You have to plan in a totally different way now.”

“I guess a business plan is always more or less a work of fiction. Ours is now more like a surrealist work of fiction. We can imagine multiple different futures, rethink aspects of the business model, but as an artistic organisation we are really trying to understand what teachers need now.”

¹⁴ <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/what-we-do/local-partnerships-programme/reset-collaboration-plan>

The global pandemic and the resulting lockdowns have created a fundamental shift in the culture, arts, and creative education sectors that will be felt for years to come. The move to online delivery of education and arts, has allowed organisations and freelancers to be innovative, go beyond their comfort zones, and experiment with different ways of delivering content. Before March 2020, who had ever thought they would be delivering a performance or a class via Zoom? At the same time, how many of us actually had “global pandemic” anywhere in our organisational risk register? Now all our plans have to be pandemic-proof. Some within smaller organisations remarked that the year ahead would be the hardest for them as they juggled with different, blended ways of delivering programmes and of differentiating work according to the needs of lots of young people. One leader of a community arts organisation commented that during the current lockdown her office had felt more like a call-centre as it dealt with the different needs of the families it was working with.

For freelancers, they learned to use digital means to deliver content and expand their reach well beyond their previous audiences. Geography and physical limitations were no longer an issue for consumers and many artists were excited for this new and increased exposure. Depending on the art form, many freelancers were able to adapt to the new medium and learned to promote themselves online. Freelancers we spoke to, see performing online as a continuing part of their work after lockdown, relishing in the new exposure being virtual has brought them. Unfortunately some art forms could not make the jump to digital, as the director of an African Drumming organisation pointed to the difficulty the drummers had transferring their art form online. The beats, the rhythm and atmosphere created by the drummers did not translate. In the drive to continue using programs like Zoom, Teams and Houseparty to deliver culture and creative education online, we must remember that many art forms, like music and dance, still need to be experienced in person.

Creative education organisations that work with young people had to move to online delivery the same as freelancers. There was a wealth of online programming created for young people and families to take advantage of. So much so, that it was hard for people to navigate and find what they wanted or needed. The organisations that found success online were the ones that focused on delivering quality programming. However, the successful organisations tended to be the bigger, well funded groups. Smaller organisations and institutions who had to furlough staff and cut costs were left behind. With the digital genie out of the bottle, many organisations will continue with their online programming for the foreseeable future. A positive side effect of this is that parents are now much more focused and involved in their children’s education and creative programming. Parent engagement has increased and will most likely continue and could become a key new factor in how the work is developed and delivered.

However, we need to make sure that the rush to continue online delivery does not increase the cultural gap even further. The digital divide has been exacerbated by the pandemic and there are now even greater numbers of children and young people who will not be able to take advantage of virtual arts and art programming. In person performance, performance spaces and creative spaces need to safely make a comeback to ensure that all members of the UK, regardless of race or economic standing can enjoy the arts.

“As a young person, you want to have security. You know what I mean. When I was 19 or 20, I didn’t know what the arts jobs or arts newsletters were. So it’s making them aware. Now I tell the 14 and 15 year olds I work with to sign up to the newsletters. Let’s not talk about Stormzy or Chipmunks or rap battles. Let’s talk about opportunities and funding.”

Young people, especially Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, disabled, LGBTQ and refugee young people have been the hardest hit by the lockdown. These young Londoners relied on the arts, cultural and creative education organisations and creative spaces to be able to express themselves, to learn, to grow and in some cases to escape. Now they are entering an uncertain future with reduced opportunities to do all of these. It will be up to arts and creative education organisations to provide these opportunities and more. There is a looming mental health and wellbeing crisis on the horizon and creative education organisations can play a vital role in supporting families and schools as they work to support young people. Arts to support wellbeing is a proven methodology and organisations may want to take cues from social prescribers, linking their work to improved wellbeing as a potential source of funding. Unfortunately the mental health crisis is converging with an increasing educational attainment gap. We heard the opening up of a debate on what the role of creative education should be as the plan to reopen schools begins to take shape. Should the emphasis be on helping young people to catch up on all the learning that they’ve missed, or more on helping them make the difficult mental and emotional transition back into the world?¹⁵

As one practitioner commented, *“the arts is often the one non-judgemental place a young person has in their lives. When they’re being judged and tested on everything else, we need to preserve that.”*

Yet schools will likely focus on core subjects in an effort to close that gap. With arts programming usually the first to be cut, organisations and freelancers will need to work with schools to find out what their priorities are rather than, as one freelancer told us, *“doing the things organisations or artists think is important.”*

“If this country wants to have an arts sector in the future then who is going to keep it going? If you’ve taken it out of the syllabus, told young people to work in tech, then who is going to keep the sector going?”

Outside of school, creative education organisations can help young people return to the arts and help them think of the arts and arts organisations as viable, realistic possibilities for future careers and employment. However, and this was stressed by a majority of our conversation participants and interviewees, young people must be authentically involved in the conversations about what they need and what they want from their engagement with the arts and creative education organisations. Youth panels and youth-led initiatives should be the norm moving forward, created to give guidance and feedback to the sector on a continuing basis. *“These panels should not be one-offs and not created in response to funder initiatives,”* said the director of a music and performance education programme. Organisations should also start employing young people within their organisations. As

¹⁵ (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/aug/26/attainment-gap-between-poor-pupils-and-their-peers-widening>).

another director said, *“Give young people job opportunities in organisations, give them valuable programme and leadership experience so they can grow into roles.”* By creating space for young people, especially underrepresented young people, in organisations to learn and grow, they can ensure representation will be authentic and appreciated.

There is optimism for the role that creative education organisations can play in supporting the sector and young Londoners once we have emerged from lockdown. There is also a role organisations can play in creating a diverse sector, where all people feel welcome and see themselves represented in the creativity on the stage and behind the scenes. The creative sector and creative education must evolve to meet the new reality our world finds itself in.

“Creative education needs to evolve. Even the concept of creativity needs to evolve. Creativity is inventiveness, creativity is problem solving, creativity is adaptability. And creative education doesn’t always match what creativity is.”

The time has come for the creative sector to understand that it encompasses a great many things and a great many people if it is to survive.

5. Recommendations

We asked our participants for recommendations for organisations and the work they do with young Londoners. The discussions were very candid with many stressing how they hoped the recommendations would be taken to heart. We have tried to reflect these recommendations pretty much as they were put by those we had conversations with, whilst grouping them broadly according to their subject.

Representation and Diversity

- Don’t take diverse creatives for granted. Don’t just use our faces and names just to make yourselves look diverse.
- They have to be willing and committed to telling diverse stories, to working with diverse artists. Usually the people raising the funds aren’t diverse but they are the ones planning everything. Let diverse creatives be there at the idea time because they will have the knowledge of what young people have said to them. And bring in the young people! Speak to the young people you are serving.
- You can tell young people to take risks, but for a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic young person taking a risk is not a reality they can take advantage of. Being able to take risks is a privilege.
- Understand that the class system is an issue. The opportunities are not equitable and not open to all.
- We have to make sure the young people that are not being listened to are listened to. The innovators and entrepreneurs are in the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and other underrepresented communities, they are just not being given the opportunities.

For organisations working with freelancers

- Organisations should make sure to continue to keep freelancers in the conversation about projects rather than having them come in to do a one-time project or performance.
- Use creatives to help create your creative curriculum. Talk to them. Work with them.
- Instead of having staff try to deliver work creatives would do, have creatives take part in the process and take advantage of their skills.
- Organisations need to make a more supportive space for freelancers. There needs to be more communication and spaces for collaboration.
- Programming must be consistent and flexible. It's great to have a moment in school but create something consistent and long lasting. Invest in the space and create space for emotional development within that creativity.
- People are really keen to create and have cross curricular spaces. Don't know if that's too radical or not. Science mixed with poetry, things like that.
- Make spaces where creatives can do teacher training events or even just chats. If the teachers don't know how to be creative themselves they worry about seeming silly so they try to steer clear. Go to teacher colleges and help them get enthused. Give the teacher tips. Don't take away our work, but for the teachers that are interested this could be helpful.

For organisations working with young Londoners

- Ask young people what they want to do. What they are interested in. It seems obvious but that's not what's happening. It's got to be co-creation.
- Young people have had to "simply take" a lot of what has happened as a result of the pandemic. Most of that has been decided elsewhere and is outside their control. How can we give them back some agency over their lives?
- Working with young people may just mean really listening to them for a while and just giving them the space to express and be themselves. Some of these emotions may be ones that adults find less easy to hear.
- Connect with and learn from organisations working with and supporting young carers and looked-after young people. Their experiences and feelings are now not dissimilar to those of young people in general as a result of the pandemic.
- Recognise that there is more going on in young people's lives beyond their interaction with you. Young people are busy and have a lot of responsibility. What you are doing with them really has to serve a purpose in their lives.
- Teach young people how to network. Create programmes that help youth learn to network and talk with people, learning to build relationships that will help them. Help young people practice their networking and communication skills.
- Create mentorships between creatives and young people so young people can get first hand advice, experience and guidance in the sector.
- Give more guidance and experience to young people so they know what funding opportunities exist. Use less jargony language.
- Allow youth to explore different opportunities. Many creatives didn't start until later and didn't know what was possible until they tried a few things.
- Extend the age of youth past 25 - many young people are just getting an idea of what they want to do and what opportunities exist by 25 and then the support is cut short.

- Make space so you can learn from the young people and create appropriate work that suits their needs. Don't just follow the grant and create things for funding.
- There needs to be more individualisation. Work with young people individually and help them identify what are their strengths.
- Social media is the young people's lifeline. Industry gets it much more than the creative sector does. Business pays attention to what young people are listening to, wearing, what's trending. The creative sector needs to pay attention.
- There needs to be a festival celebrating youth and what they have done during the pandemic - like the Festival of Brexit but better, led by youth and championing their work. It will let them know they are being heard. *"We need a summer of big beautiful creative chaos."*

Sector support

- Capture the best of the creative innovation and strategic changes that have made a difference during the pandemic and find ways to share it more widely.
- Develop new evaluation models that can capture the more process-based work that will be needed for young people to come back from the pandemic and evaluation models that can track how young people develop creative careers in their own terms.
- Make more opportunities such as were provided by this enquiry for people from different artforms, organisations, parts of London to share experiences and make connections.
- Support individual freelancers to make new connections and develop new collaborations with each other. Support the move to Universal Basic Income now about to be trialled in London.
- Wellbeing is not just about "feeling a bit better about yourself" and your situation. The mental health crisis amongst young people will be with us for a long time to come and creative education practitioners can play a key role in addressing this. How can we be helped to play out part?
- Those working within the sector have been managing a huge range of needs among young people and families that they worked with themselves. Mentoring and other forms of support could be a crucial way of preventing burnout.
- If social prescribing is going to be a key way of funding work in the future, provide guidance and broker partnerships for organisations that are able to work in this field to help them take advantage of these opportunities.
- Health and arts funders, in partnership with local borough level Clinical Commissioners, and mental health specialists, could support projects through Covid-19 recovery grants. A specific mental health support approach, engaging arts providers via community Covid-19 recovery hubs led by local authorities, could integrate mental health support and arts activities in planning and strategy development.
- Make space for debate about where and how the creative education sector should focus its work to best help young people, teachers and schools recover from the pandemic.
- Strategic funding to support teachers and artists collaborating together to develop post lockdown projects which might help close the enlarged learning gap between different pupils while also reacclimatising pupils to school.

- Did someone mention the return of Creative Partnerships, which sounds like a good idea? Schools given freedom from Government/Ofsted to focus on play/creativity/whole child development.
- Provide a curated space to connect artists/creative organisation and teachers/leads. Teachers offered support to allow them to participate fully in training development opportunities offered by creative collaborations.
- Help create a free tech bank to repurpose and redistribute unused digital devices to increase more young people's access.

We also asked our interviewees **what advice they would give to young Londoners** as they pursue the arts and careers in the arts:

- If you are passionate about it. Keep learning, keep growing. Yes you will have to have multiple jobs but there is no reason that the other job can't feed into your creative passions.
- Learn to teach. Learn to facilitate. Learn to promote yourself online. Learn to do it confidently.
- Find yourself a group. It could be informal or more formal but try to join a group. It will give you the community you need.
- If opportunities aren't there, band together with other creatives and say 'Hey, we want and need this space.'
- The mechanisms for older creatives to mentor younger creatives needs to be built. The mentorships need to be done well and paid.
- Join a community or collective. It is very important. Make friends and as a freelancer you have to have the courage to go up to people ask for what you need
- You need a good side hustle. Take the time to find one that helps you fund your creative passion. Figure out what is your uniqueness. Be able to talk about yourself.