

How to plan for the cultural and creative needs of young people in a changing funding environment

Tom Cunningham, The Young Lambeth Cooperative (2016)

Young Lambeth Cooperative was set up by Lambeth Council just 2 years ago to deal with the funding cuts to youth services and to attempt to design a new model of commissioning that included young people in the decision-making process and worked cooperatively with providers, young people and funding bodies.

Young Lambeth Cooperative's aim is to include young people in the process with several outcomes – a raised awareness of services available to them, guidance and opportunities delivered by Young Lambeth Cooperative and a chance to have a voice in their communities. Our goal is to have outstanding quality of services accessed by as many young people as they can manage and have our young people have a real say and make a change to the services available for young people. By being a youth-led organization, we intend to empower those young people who have ambitions to shape and change their community. In some way, this harks back to Cameron's 'Big Society' concept of a few years back.

However, there are challenges present in how we achieve our goals. Our organization has to be a provider of quality youth services as well as a funder of them. We have to take the lead on making the training and youth work we do of a high quality as well as monitoring and working with providers to raise the quality of their provisions. With large funding cuts already having been implemented, and the potential of more on the horizon, we have to find ways to manage costs while justifying our existence. The importance of finding ways to connect with families, providers and schools is paramount to connecting young people with opportunities and meeting their cultural and creative needs.

In response to '**Organism, not Mechanism: An Ecological Approach to Cultural Learning**', John Holden's paper, Young Lambeth Cooperative is developing to become part of the more organic approach to cultural appropriation.

The context of high levels of cuts to public services in Lambeth, a borough which has some of the highest levels of deprivation in the country, alongside a burgeoning and rapid movement of gentrification through the borough, especially in Brixton, provides both challenges and opportunities to the 'cultural well-being' of the boroughs resident young people. Organisations are beginning to realize the need for collaboration and communication to enable better referrals, stronger funding bids and sharing of resources. Young Lambeth Cooperative is becoming a way of sharing information about services and connecting organisations who can partner in some way.

This approach shares the ecological approach described by John as ‘concentrating on the quantity and quality of relationships between the creators, producers and participants who are involved in cultural activities’. However, the second part of the sentence, ‘studying the networks they inhabit’, is more problematic. This is where we have to encourage providers to design their creative content around the needs and responses of the young people so that their creative work gives value to their own cultures, communities and backgrounds, allowing them to reflect on the value of their own culture as well as connect with other cultures surrounding them in London. In a vastly multi-cultural, multi-faith and wealth-divided area such as Lambeth, there are many areas to explore but also many conflicts that can arise from such inequality and difference. The challenge for us is to equip providers to creatively explore these cultures and there are many projects and organisations currently doing so.

‘It follows from all of this that the role of schools in partnering with funded organisations, and creating the conditions where children see funded culture as a normal and regular part of their lives is crucial. It also implies that cultural organisations need to engage with children through their families and peer networks as well as through formal education and extracurricular activities.’

There are some educational establishments who engage with community organisations and publicly funded bodies, however, all too many schools do not have the inclination or time to forge links with these organisations and changes in staff, which happens often in inner-city London schools, can lose links that take months to reconnect. The best practices have schools and publicly funded bodies working cooperatively to refer and link young people who would benefit from certain provisions.

The most encouraging way forward is building the enthusiasm of young people and supporting them by growing their confidence to engage with their communities to make a real difference. By offering support and guidance and giving them real responsibility, we hope to assist them in making real differences in their communities in the future. The model of including them in the process is a new approach to how the old council made decisions and we are seeing real interest and an increased knowledge of the processes of how youth provision is enabled in the borough.

www.anewdirection.org.uk/cultural-learning-ecology
#CLEcology