

**THE LISTENING PROJECT**

# **ENABLING CULTURAL COMMUNITIES**

Report by New Local for A New Direction

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**Children are a kind of indicator species.  
If we can build a successful city for children,  
we will have a successful city for all people”**

*Enrique Peñalosa, former Mayor of Bogotá.*

## INTRODUCTION

**A cultural community can be defined as a group of people and their partners who engage with creative activities and culture in different ways to build creative places. Creative places have many benefits to young people and the wider community. They can increase social and emotional skills, and employability; develop self-confidence, self-respect and sense of achievement; develop social capital;<sup>1</sup> boost personal development, imagination and creativity; and improve physical and mental health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> As London’s future residents and workforce, young people should be given a central role in building a cultural community and planning for their future, whether it’s in terms of housing, infrastructure, or cultural venues.**

Over the last year, the lives of young Londoners have been dramatically altered. The lockdown restrictions have forced them to conduct their daily activities in the confined spaces of their homes, often in overcrowded conditions. While some have adapted well to this change, others have suffered from digital fatigue, further isolation and worsening mental health. Several community-led initiatives have emerged to help connect people from within their homes through creative activities, such as [Creative Quarantine](#) and [The Reader at Home](#). Others like [Mutual Aid groups](#) have sprouted almost overnight across London to provide immediate support to people in need of food and medication.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also *Bowling Alone* (2000) by Robert Putnam for a more in-depth exploration of ‘social capital’.

<sup>2</sup> A New Direction. *The Cultural (Re)Generation: Building Creative Places for Young London*, p. 17. Available: <https://www.anewdirection.org.uk/asset/3226/view>

<sup>3</sup> See also *Communities vs. Coronavirus: the rise of Mutual Aid* (2020) by Luca Tiratelli and Simon Kaye for more about the role of Mutual Aid during the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, the range of services available to young people in London had been declining since austerity began over a decade ago. At least £39 million had been cut from council youth services between 2011 and 2018.<sup>4</sup> Nearly a third of London's youth centres are now at risk of closure within the next six months due to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of austerity, compounded by the consequences of the pandemic, has reduced the number of opportunities and spaces where young people can congregate and take part in meaningful conversations about the future of their area. Whilst the issues of representation and local democracy among young people have moved up the agenda in recent years, progress has been slow. There have also been significant impacts on young people's ability, prospects and access to creative activities, work and amenities. The pandemic has also affected disadvantaged families disproportionately, deepening inequality when it comes to opportunities and access to creative activities, work and amenities.

In September 2020, the government launched its £2 billion Kickstart Scheme to provide funding to employers to create 6-month job placements for young people who are on Universal Credit. Building on this scheme, several programmes across London, such as those delivered by Project Zero, Waltham Forest CIC and CRATE, Create Jobs, and others have emerged to provide employers and participants with practical support, workshops and training to help young people move into employment. But there is recognition that many young people remain excluded from these schemes and that more should be done to tackle structural inequality.

This report will explore some of the key themes and priorities that have emerged from conversations over the last six weeks about how we can enable cultural communities.

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4 [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2018\\_03\\_20\\_sb\\_londons\\_lost\\_youth\\_services\\_2018\\_final.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2018_03_20_sb_londons_lost_youth_services_2018_final.pdf)

5 <https://londonyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Full-Results-Running-on-Reserves-Final-web.pdf>

## FINDINGS

### What is a creative place?

Young people have different concepts of what is meant by a creative place as these are often shaped by their own experiences, backgrounds, and expectations. Through this listening project, young people have described their ideal creative place as having the qualities of openness, inclusivity, and equal opportunity. For example, two young participants described a creative place as



**somewhere you can create any forms of art, music, script, movements, etc... it's a place to express yourself in a way that you see fit, to represent how you see the world, where you can enhance your talent..."** – a young person



**a place where everyone is welcome to put their ideas forward in order to contribute to cultural progress or just a project"**

– a young person

### What it means to build a creative place now

**"It's about creating platforms and spaces for young people to come together themselves"** – a council art commissioner

We asked young people and those who work closely with them in the creative and cultural sector what it means to them to build a creative place that young people can feel a part of. A number of key themes emerged from our conversations:

## Being able to influence key decisions that affect them

It's not just about creating a youth panel or advisor, but genuinely engaging young people from the start and allowing them to influence decision making and have ownership of a wide range of issues in their area. This can be through youth-led and peer-led decision-making teams. Many practitioners caution against relying solely on youth advisors, and instead making a conscious effort to reach out to young people from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds who are often excluded from the key decisions that will affect them.

## Being free to experiment and make mistakes along the way



**Don't be afraid to make mistakes. That's how you learn"**

- a council art commissioner

Working with young people often involves taking certain risks. It is important to be able to implement the ideas that they bring forward even if this sometimes means allowing things to fail as part of that learning journey. The current funding system which does not accommodate failures is incompatible with the reality of working with young people and should be changed to incentivise young people to be creative and experiment, including taking risks.

## Having the space to explore ideas and be creative

Young people are driven by activities that excite them and these are not always confined to specific buildings or to traditional categories like music or art. Having physical spaces is crucial to help foster creativity but it's important to recognise that young people's idea of place is much more fluid, and it is often shaped by their interests and background. To understand what building a creative place is for young people requires fine-grained engagement with young people. It is important to make sure that creative spaces can accommodate a diversity of needs and interests and that young people of different backgrounds have the space to sufficiently explore their interests and ideas.

Young people need to have the freedom to try new things and to do things for themselves. They tend to respond better when they have a sense of ownership of their places and the responsibility to manage a space in a way that is not deterministic or tokenistic. It is a good idea to begin with an honest conversation with young people about the practical aspect of a space, including its management and upkeep and what freedom and flexibility they have in making it their own space.

## Having the confidence to speak through creativity

Young people often find their voices through producing something creative. But they like to be reassured that their voices will be heard first before they engage in creative activities. Mentors and cheerleaders play a key role in providing that reassurance, by removing key barriers to participation and helping to boost young people's confidence.

## Barriers to creating a cultural community

### Young people don't feel the arts and culture sector in their area is for them



**...such limited ways to show their creativity... young people have lost their confidence in what they're producing"**

– a cultural programme manager

The existing working culture within the creative sector can often lead to an overwhelming fear of judgement amongst young people who are new to the sector. This first negative experience often makes settling in particularly challenging for young people and deters many from pursuing their interests further. Many young people who enter the creative industries with high expectations are often disappointed by their initial experience navigating the system.

This disillusionment among young people has been exacerbated by the experience of the current pandemic. Many young people, especially those with additional needs such as learning disabilities are finding it even more difficult to engage in creative activities or hobbies inside



their homes. Many time-starved teachers, parents and students are overwhelmed by the adjustments required by the shift to digital learning, and as a result only have the capacity to prioritise core subjects. Creative activities or subjects are often seen as a luxury, or a 'nice extra' which disadvantaged families are often excluded from accessing.

Many young people who have had contact with the criminal justice system face additional barriers to engaging with the creative and cultural sector. Whilst many of them have interests in music, writing and visual arts, they do not consider these as a future career path. In fact, they often do not see their future in the formal creative and cultural sector, where their criminal record can often be a barrier. Instead, they prefer to rely on their informal links to help them record, produce and promote their art forms.

## Lack of representation and diversity within the sector



**If you see more people like you, it gives you more confidence to put forward ideas”** - a young person

Even though London appears very diverse, there are many areas that still lack representation from people of disadvantaged and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. This lack of representation forms a real barrier to building a truly creative and cultural community.

In fact, a majority of young people in London from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who have experienced the care system or who have had contact with the criminal justice system, have not had any interactions with the formal cultural and creative sector, such as museums, art galleries and theatres, even though these venues are concentrated in the capital.

## Digital poverty and fatigue

The lack of digital access is one of the biggest barriers to young people engaging with education and creative activities. In some schools, up to 70 percent of students are not able to access learning due to the lack of computers or Wi-Fi.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, many young people are digitally

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52399589>

fatigued by the large numbers of online interactions that have replaced in-person teaching and social interactions as a result of the pandemic.

The inability to physically come together during lockdown is also a major barrier to being innovative and thinking creatively. Innovations have often happened around geographical locations and hubs for innovations. There is recognition that although many people have adapted well virtually during lockdown, the value of in-person interactions cannot be fully achieved through online platforms.

## Deteriorating mental health



**“Many young people really struggle with mental health but this is seriously lacking government support”** – a young person

Many young people feel overwhelmed and are therefore reluctant to take part in more online interactions as these have taken a toll on their mental health. Particularly in urban areas, many young people are facing overcrowding at home which has a severe impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. Overcrowding has also affected the confidence of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often shy away from turning on their video during calls and online classes.

## Lack of role models and supportive adults



**“Younger people have better ideas and drive to put something on the stage, but they need someone to help them get there.”**

– a young person

Young people highlight the importance of strong role models and supportive adults in the different environments where they interact. Some young people who are interested in pursuing a creative career path often face ridicule and bullying from their peers in school. Within the sector, young people often feel their ideas are not valued and often dismissed simply because of their young age and lack of experience.



**A lot of my friends are not supported by parents to go into theatre because you can't win in theatre like you can in sports... drama and acting in schools are not introduced early enough"**

- a young person



**The idea of working in the creative sector is quite scary for parents"** – a programme manager

At home, many young people find they do not have the support of their parents and other adults in pursuing a creative activity or growing their talents. These experiences have been described as disempowering and discouraging more young people from considering the creative industries or engaging in a cultural community.

## **Lack of support from local leaders**



**The voices of young people are very much there but the power to change is not there... the voices of young people are suppressed quite frequently"** – a young person

Young people are keen to voice their opinions on things that they feel passionate about, but they feel that they are not listened to by adult leaders who ultimately make the key decisions that will affect the future of their place.

Some council officers have also highlighted the difficulty in getting access to senior leaders in councils in order to gain support for a more strategic approach to cultural learning across the council. Likewise, some teachers have found it difficult to obtain buy-in from headteachers on proposals designed to encourage creative activities amongst students.

There remains little recognition of the link between creative places and overall wellbeing. The additional pressure on teachers caused by the pandemic has meant that they have little capacity to support young people's creative interests, beyond prioritising core subjects.

## Lack of places to go to

The closures of youth centres during the period of austerity has left a big void in many communities. Many needs are falling through the cracks as it is increasingly difficult to understand and capture the complexity of young people's lives without the necessary resources and safe spaces to do so. Over time this has led to widening inequality as some places have suffered the impact of these closures more severely than others. As a result, young people are often left without the necessary tools and resources to identify places where they can go to meet people and take part in creative activities in their local community.

This, coupled with the challenges of the pandemic, has had some negative impacts on young people's ability to make their voices heard. The lack of tangible outcomes over the last decade has been demoralising for them. Young people who have proactively engaged in consultations over the years but have witnessed their ideas failing to materialise are also becoming more sceptical and reluctant to take part in future ideas-generating consultations.

## Maximising existing and new opportunities

### Give local agencies more flexibility to adapt to local needs

The Mayor of London's [Culture at Risk – Resources](#) set up to support freelancers and to give the industry a voice has provided some flexibility to local government to better able to provide more tailored support to young artists who find themselves in particularly challenging situations. There is also the opportunity to link local health services to the creative sector, for example through social prescribing. This can be introduced locally and may provide much needed funding for the creative sector, and at the same time help demonstrate the strong link between creative or cultural activities and people's overall wellbeing.

## Recognise the importance of informality

Many practitioners have highlighted the importance of “keeping things relatively informal, and making sure things are not too prescriptive” when things do return to normal following the pandemic. This means allowing young people to wander and feel comfortable being in a shared space, to explore volunteering opportunities in their own time and to decide to be involved when they are ready.

## Provide tailored support through mentoring and apprenticeship



**“Young people are not provided with a menu of options... support has not adapted to the changing world of creative work”**

- a programme manager

Many local agencies are already reflecting on and reconsidering their roles in the community. Instead of just focusing on promoting theatre and art, some local theatres and venues, such as the Rose Theatre, are focusing on helping young people build confidence and life skills through mentorship and apprenticeship programmes.

Support and mentoring approaches should adapt to young people’s new ways of working. Young people today are much more agile and resourceful in finding less conventional methods of entering the creative industries, by promoting their art and establishing links on social media, rather than through established organisations like the Victoria & Albert Museum or the Barbican as the first resort. There should be more opportunities to match professionals and young people in order to provide more effective tailored support.

## Grow different kinds of partnership

The pandemic has led to different kinds of partnerships being established in some areas. Some places developed new projects to get creative materials to people in disadvantaged areas, which led to new partnerships being formed. The use of digital platforms has also connected many people who would not usually interact under normal circumstances.

## **Build ownership among young people as they reconnect after the pandemic**

There is the opportunity to reconnect people following the lockdown, building upon the digital connections that have been established during the pandemic, and bringing these into new physical spaces where young people can explore their creative ideas further in person.

Several initiatives introduced before the pandemic such as [Portobello New Youthquake](#) and [The People's Pavilion](#) which were designed and run by young people, demonstrate the potential of young people in shaping the public realm. These point to the energy and potential contribution of young people in reviving their local high street if given the opportunity and support to do so. But young people want to be at the table from the very beginning, rather than just being brought in to be 'consulted'. Only by being involved from the very beginning can they develop a strong sense of ownership of their place and community.

## **Strengthen democracy and accountability in the post-COVID recovery**



**Are things designed for people, or the other way around?"**

– a senior programme manager



**Young people need more essential roles so they don't stay on the periphery"** – a programme manager

There is an opportunity to strengthen local democracy and participation through more effective involvement and inclusive engagement. Some representatives from London Boroughs have suggested creating a youth panel to engage young people on key decisions around housing development and regeneration in their area. But it is important to ensure that these youth panels are representative of the different sections of society and if this is not achieved then a different approach should be considered to ensure that no one is excluded.

## Tackle inequality



**“It’s important not to shy away from difficult conversations around issues of class, race, discrimination”** – a young person

The pandemic has highlighted the deepening inequality experienced by many young people and their families in London. This ranges from class to digital inequality. Tackling this inequality and improving racial diversity should become a priority if we’re to maximise the creative potential of young people across the capital. This means ensuring that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic voices are heard and included in conversations about how we can build a creative place and foster creativity locally, including through strategic issues like regeneration, housing and planning. Capturing the voices of traditionally disempowered groups will help shape the city in a way that better meets the needs of the young generation.

## Cultivating partnership working

### Foster both horizontal and vertical partnerships

It’s important to recognise the different range of roles, ranging from administration and compliance to those with specialist roles like an arts commissioner or therapist. Building partnerships both within an organisation and across the relevant sectors, and encouraging people to contribute to the common pot are key to achieving the best outcomes.

### Promote collaboration over competition in the sector and beyond



**“We need more collaboration between young people and more experienced professionals”** – a young actor and producer

Young people often gain their first experience in the creative industries through a short-term apprenticeship or traineeship in a small local

company or initiative. However, they often find it difficult to secure further longer-term work following this first work experience, which can be disheartening.

A more collaborative culture within the sector has been suggested as a way to encourage more sharing of resources and expertise between larger and smaller organisations, enabling a shared sector-wide focus on supporting young people to progress through their career and reach their potential. This should be combined with the wider community's role in helping to signpost young people to the right resources.

## **Embed culture across an organisation or council**

'Culture' should be embedded across an organisation. In areas undergoing regeneration, it should be seen as an investment pipeline to culture, where the planning process and decisions can hugely benefit local organisations and cultural offers.

The establishment of the Mayor's London Borough of Culture award has been hugely successful in maximising wider engagement with schools and other local agencies, often strengthening the support of head teachers and local leaders.

In some areas, it has proven to be more productive to engage wider services such as library services to help progress a community-led initiative. Library services often have the potential to engage and reach a wider audience than traditional youth services. The quality of engagements through these services also tend to be higher than those through conventional youth services which are often associated with a level of stigma.

## **Engage wider partners**

In addition to bringing together relevant teams within a council, there needs to be a strategy in bringing in wider partners such as schools, universities, local employers and other agencies. For example, in Kingston, [CIRKI](#) brings together emerging musicians and help them navigate the complex system by connecting them to the culture team, licensing team and the police to tackle health and safety concerns



around creative performances. By helping to remove these barriers, the council and other agencies are enabling young artists to focus more effectively on their creative work. The London Boroughs of Culture have played a big role in helping young people find their way in by supporting them in tackling key technical barriers.

It's important to recognise that councils can often stand in the way of getting a community-led initiative off the ground. In some cases, it is more effective to build support through establishing strong partnerships with local organisations before formally engaging the council. For example, in Kingston, the Culture Education Partnership sits separately from the council to maximise more independent sharing and the potential of these local partnerships.

## **Co-locate services**

The establishment of community hubs in some areas has proven to be beneficial. Some community hubs bring together council offices, the library, museum, heritage amenities, music and arts, and adult education under one roof, enabling the different cultural teams to work as one. Working out of same building also helps bring people together much more effectively, and increases people's awareness of the different teams' priorities.

## **Strengthening local leadership**

### **Get more young people involved in conversations about their place and community**

There has been a significant drive towards establishing youth advisors as a way to ensure that young people are involved in discussions about their place. Whilst some youth advisors have proven quite successful in some parts of the country, in some areas, there is a risk of the exercise becoming tokenistic, rather than having any sustained impact. Young people involved in these groups often feel that their contributions are cherry-picked and that not much power is actually handed over to them in reality. To ensure a genuine transfer of power requires the

handover of some funding and responsibility to the young people, and the ability to make key decisions about spending and commissioning.

## Identify the “movers and shakers” in the community



**Identify people who are connected in their community and have influence, and involve them** – a senior programme manager

An important first step in building a cultural community is finding the right people in the community who can rally the whole community to contribute to discussions about certain issues. This could be active residents and young people who are running grassroots activities and are well-known and respected in their area. This process can be time-consuming but has been described as ultimately rewarding in the long-term.

Whilst youth forums can be useful for initial engagement, it's important not to rely solely on these as they can often be self-selecting and are therefore not necessarily representative of the wider community.

## Open local leaders up to the energy of young people



**It's about exposing local leaders to the energy and curiosity of young people, and meeting the young people where they are.**

– a Big Local representative

Young people want to be involved in key decision-making that affects their community. However, the language used in the usual forum and stakeholder meetings are often unrelatable to the young people, and can form a barrier to participation. It is essential to reframe the language used in these settings to reflect how young people would themselves describe their vision, interests and activities. For example, young people could be involved in developing the wording and design for leaflets and public advertisement targeted at other young people. It's important to rethink the communication strategies that are intended for young people and ensure that any engagement materials are relatable and “don't risk sounding too corporate”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Contribution by a council officer

## Let young people take the lead



**Create the circumstances to help young people do things for themselves.”** – a Big Local representative

Young people should lead the process of local decision making, supported by local leaders who can motivate them. This will ensure that local leaders are meeting the young people where they are, by acting as a mentor or cheerleader, reassuring them they don't have to ask for permission to explore their creative ideas. The default position which assumes young people are always up to no good needs to be challenged.

Whilst young people recognise they lack the experience working in the creative and cultural sector, they have the enthusiasm and fresh ideas that they are keen to bring to the table. Letting young people take the lead crucially means enabling them to express and explore these ideas with the right support and encouragement from more experienced peers both from within the sector and from their community. Many young people are accustomed to new ways of working and publicity, and can play a critical role in rallying the support of other young people through social media to help shape the creative space and cultural community of the future which they can all feel a part of.

## CONCLUSION AND CALLS TO ACTION

Through the listening project we have heard the vision of young people and those who work with them, as well as what building a creative place and cultural community really means to them. This report has tried to distil the key overlapping points that have emerged during the individual conversations and listening workshop. It is clear that there is a lot of work that still needs to be done to help young people become an integral part of building the cultural community that is so important for strengthening social capital, improving everyone's work opportunities and enhancing the community's wellbeing.

To help pave the way for change, we have drawn out the three top priorities for achieving this vision based on what the young people and their partners have emphasised during this listening project. These are outlined in the calls to action below.

### Calls to action

- 1. Reform the funding system for culture and the arts to promote collaboration rather than competition between local stakeholders and partners.** The current funding and commissioning process can often be a barrier to young people being more involved in building a cultural community. A new funding system should require new proposals to explore opportunities for collaboration with local partners or stakeholders. Additionally, funding for arts and culture should be rethought and redesigned so as to incentivise young people to be creative and experiment with new ideas, which often involves taking a level of risk.
- 2. Promote genuine co-production between young people and local partners in placemaking.** Co-production with young people should become a normal and essential part of any strategic decision-making including in areas such as planning, housing, regeneration and cultural offers.

### **3. Increase the representation of people from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds in the creative and cultural sector.**

The lack of representation across London's diverse population in the creative and cultural sector is a major barrier to building a truly inclusive cultural community that benefits everyone. Accessing the creative and cultural industries is particularly challenging among disadvantaged communities in London. One possible way to address this is by providing more scholarships as well as traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities in schools in deprived neighbourhoods. Introducing arts and culture at an earlier age can also help children to develop their talents and increase the chances of young people considering a future career in the creative or cultural sector.

## APPENDIX

### About the Listening Projects

**A New Direction is a London-based non-profit, generating opportunities for children and young people to unlock their creativity.**

In January 2021, in a rapidly changing context, A New Direction commissioned five partner organisations to listen to the concerns and experience of young Londoners, as well as organisations within the rich ecology that supports young people, creativity and culture in the city. This work is called the [Listening Projects](#), and outcomes will feed into A New Direction's future planning and activity.

The Listening Projects cover five themes: the experience of young Londoners, supporting organisations leading practice, the earth emergency, enabling cultural communities, and employment and work. New Local has led the fourth theme focusing on how we can enable cultural communities in London, reflecting on one of the most challenging times for the creative and cultural sector.

### Methodology

The research involved two core components: a listening workshop and a series of one-to-one interviews.

The workshop was held on 11 February 2021, with 28 participants including young Londoners, representatives from London Boroughs, London Mutual Aid groups, Big Local areas, Community Land Trusts, as well as other partners and organisations working with young people in London. The workshop included a speed-sharing session, two facilitated plenary sessions, and facilitated breakout sessions.

The workshop was complemented by a series of one-to-one interviews with a number of individuals, including an art commissioning manager,

Big Local reps and Mutual Aid coordinators, as well as a number of young people, including a mutual aid volunteer, a charity fundraiser and theatre producer, and an aspiring actor and scriptwriter. A separate focus group discussion with young adults was also carried out at a young offender institution with the support of an arts and heritage consultant.

We set out to investigate young people's experiences in engaging with creative and cultural activities in both the places they live and work, as well as how their partners are supporting them to navigate the creative industry. To develop a deeper understanding of these issues, the key questions have been designed to explore the current approaches that organisations take to support young Londoners through culture and creativity to improve their communities; the key challenges facing young people and the organisations that support them; any new opportunities that have emerged and how we can learn from any existing opportunities that have been missed; how we can strengthen local partnerships and leadership; how we might enable more community-led approaches to become more mainstreamed in the future; and any key lessons that have been learned.