

A New Direction Listening Project

Young Londoners, and the Response of Culture to the Earth crisis

Climate Museum UK

March 2021



Word cloud based on our [survey question asking respondents to describe their feelings about the Earth crisis](#).

“Frightened for my kid’s future and desperate for tipping point change.”

“It’s hard to find space within and outside of the curriculum for space and time to really address the Earth crisis. How can voices be heard if there is no space made for this?”

“We just need to be taught about all the ways we can change from now on.”

“How do we choreograph some more positive imagining than negative reflecting?”



Table of contents

Table of contents	2
Introduction	3
1.1 Context for the Listening Projects	3
1.1.1 About this research project	3
1.1.2 The context of the Earth crisis, culture and young people	3
1.2 About us, our perspective and terms used	4
1.2.1 About CMUK	4
1.2.3 Explanation of terms and concepts used in our research	5
Methodology for this research	5
2.1 Stages of the project	5
2.2 The four areas of questions	6
Area 1: Emotions and the role of creativity	6
Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking	6
Area 3: Youth voice and democratic participation	6
Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change	6
2.3 Reach	6
2.4 Focus group approach	7
Findings	9
3.1 Findings from our background research	9
Area 1: Emotions and the role of creativity	10
Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking	10
Area 3: Youth voice, and democratic participation	10
Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change	11
3.2 Findings from focus groups	12
Area 1: Emotions and the role of creativity	12
Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking	13
Area 3: Youth voice and democratic participation	14
Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change	16
3.3 Findings from interviews	19
Area 1: Emotions and the role of creativity	20
Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking	20
Area 3: Youth voice and democratic participation	21
Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change	22
Conclusion and calls to action	22
4.1 Summary of themes	22
4.2 Calls to action	24
Appendix	25

1. Introduction

1.1 Context for the Listening Projects

1.1.1 About this research project

[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 organisations to work with them 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. 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.

We in Climate Museum UK (CMUK) were commissioned to deliver theme 3, the Earth emergency (or crisis), and this is the report from our research. Our central question is: **With young Londoners in mind, how should culture and creative learning respond to the Earth crisis?**

1.1.2 The context of the Earth crisis, culture and young people

“Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal. Nature always strikes back – and it is already doing so with growing force and fury. Biodiversity is collapsing. One million species are at risk of extinction. Ecosystems are disappearing before our eyes ... Human activities are at the root of our descent toward chaos. But that means human action can help to solve it.” Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the UN

“Without fully appreciating and broadcasting the scale of the problems and the enormity of the solutions required, society will fail to achieve even modest sustainability goals.” Report, [Underestimating the Challenges of Avoiding a Ghastly Future](#), January 2021, multiple authors

These two quotes refer to the truth that the planet’s operating system - its stable climate and thriving biosphere - is in the process of collapse. They also both point to the essential role of human ingenuity and culture to tackle this. The challenge is overwhelming.

Over half of child and adolescent psychiatrists in England [report that](#) patients are anxious about the state of the planet, particularly climate change but also the impacts of biodiversity loss. These anxieties combine with educational pressures and worries about future employment, in the more immediate context of the pandemic and Brexit.

Young people have played a big role in climate and environmental activism in the past two years, inspired by Greta Thunberg’s school strikes, forming groups or campaigns such as XR Youth, Fridays for Future and the UK Youth Climate Coalition. Joe Brindle has set up [Teach the Future](#), supported by teachers, to get climate embedded across the curriculum. Bella Lack is a Youth Ambassador for several conservation charities. Young activists say [“You’ll die of old age, we’ll die from climate change.”](#) and “Why go to school if you won’t listen to the educated?”

This research is focused on London, a city whose wealth has grown on colonial exploitation and is sustained through global capitalism that banks on the continued supply of fossil fuels. In turn, significant proportions of its population have led activism against environmental harms, for example, with XR protests starting in London and spreading worldwide. 28 London boroughs have

declared a climate emergency. Young Londoners are not very involved in local politics but politicians have been influenced by young voices to make these declarations.

We might ask, though, how much are politicians playing to the next generation of voters and how much do they genuinely join in with these urgent calls and fears? The futurist Alex Steffen accuses the fossil fuel lobby of “[predatory delay](#)”, stealing from future generations to delay climate action for their own short-term profit. This lobby is powerful in the UK, well represented in Government and still able to obtain social license to operate by sponsoring cultural organisations and education schemes. Against these voices, educators, creatives and employers have a moral duty to young people to rethink their missions, and to open up new possible pathways for young people’s futures.

A small number of cultural practitioners have been advocating environmental action within and through culture for decades, with more joining their ranks in the past two years, for example signing up with [Culture Declares Emergency](#) or training with [Julie’s Bicycle](#). Their types of art and activism include decarbonisation, creative messaging, collaborations with scientists, eco-social participatory practice, and designing ecological innovations.

As the number of ‘creative climate leaders’ grows and diversifies, there is more sophisticated and systemic thinking - with more awareness that decarbonisation struggles and political violence are entangled. These complex problems need even more systemic and interconnected solutions that view life in terms of relationships. We increasingly grasp that the Earth crisis arises from extractivist culture, its deep roots and its political power. Extractivism means taking by force and using for profit - humans as well as other beings and materials.

To combat and disable this, we need to cultivate a longing and a vision for a more regenerative and just future. As Rob Hopkins, the founder of the Transition Towns movement argues, imagination has to be fired up so that we can reconnect, reinvent, renew and regenerate. Culture and creativity can be a powerful and generative force for this. In CMUK, we believe - or at least hope - that it can make the world a better place, stir action and allow the impossible to become possible. Children and Young People (CYP) can surely both benefit from and take a leading role in this work.

1.2 About us, our perspective and terms used

1.2.1 About CMUK

We are a mobile and digital museum stirring and collecting responses to the climate and ecological emergency.¹ Its team of creative people distributed across the UK runs a participatory programme of conversational activities, bringing in diverse voices to explore a wide range of themes beyond climate science, to focus on the lived experience and social dimensions of climate breakdown and breached planetary boundaries. It was founded by Bridget McKenzie, lead author of this report, working with Beckie Leach McDonald, James Aldridge, Lucy Carruthers, Victoria Burns and others.

We are not neutral

As an organisation, we cannot take a neutral stance when faced with injustice. We believe that the Earth crisis is caused by human industrial activity, and that knowledge of catastrophic impacts was

¹ See more <https://climatemuseumuk.org/>

ignored. That this is causing death and harm for millions of people and mass species extinctions, is an unprecedented criminal scandal.

We believe in the value of arts and culture in tackling the Earth crisis, but we also look for evidence to demonstrate this.

We aim for conversation not conversion

Because the subjects of climate and ecology are urgent and complex, it matters that people can express feelings safely, and make connections with each other, with ideas, materials and places. There are no single solutions or right answers, so although we aren't neutral, we don't campaign or lecture when facilitating activities. We are supporting young people to develop this practice, for example on student placements and through commissions.

1.2.3 Explanation of terms and concepts used in our research

What do we mean by 'Earth emergency' or 'Earth crisis'?

Our initial brief was to focus on the Climate crisis, but we asked to use an expanded framing to include the Ecological crisis. This arises from long histories of unjust land use and involves ecocidal acts that deplete biodiversity and displace indigenous people, in turn worsening climate breakdown and causing zoonotic pandemics such as COVID-19. The use of fossil fuels is interwoven into this story of harm. For more background see our research on the linked crises of climate, ecology and human health.²

What do we mean by culture and creative practice?

The term 'culture and creative practice' is used throughout in alignment with Arts Council England's framework in which creative practice includes the Arts, ordinary creativity, and creativity in design, technology, science and heritage, which over time generates culture. Culture is defined broadly, but with an emphasis on the imaginative modalities rather than the broadest concept of culture as social discourse, values and habits.

What is CYP and YP?

We use CYP to mean Children and Young People. Very often, we refer only to YP (or Young People) when referring to the young adults we consulted.

In addition, 'they' is used as a generic pronoun for people we talked to.

2. Methodology for this research

2.1 Stages of the project

- Initiation: Set up meetings with A New Direction and with the other Listening Project teams.
- Background research: Wrote a [framework paper](#) to ensure our approach rested on evidence and best practice.

² CMUK project collated hundreds of resources to map [links between the pandemic and the Earth crisis](#)

- Planning: Detailed plan for the focus groups and interviews, briefed Deep Listening practitioners, and created an online survey for recruitment
- Recruitment: Promoted an 'Invitation to be Heard' via our website, and sent target emails to youth groups, cultural workers and educators in London.
- Delivery: Held three focus groups online (for educators/parents; for cultural workers; for young people); held nine one-to-one interviews.
- Analysis of all findings and writing this report

2.2 The four areas of questions

In our background research, we expanded and explored the range of questions outlined in the brief. Then, in order to hold accessible, manageable conversations we reduced these down into four areas of questions. These are large, challenging questions, so we led participants into each one with a more personal or creative question. We found that in focus groups, there was only enough time to discuss three areas, so Area 2 was left for optional responses after the sessions.

Area 1: Emotions and the role of creativity

- What are your emotions when you think of the troubled planet?
- How does culture or creativity help CYP explore and express their emotions in dealing with the Earth crisis?

Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking

- Do you have examples of how creativity and critical thinking can help explore different perspectives and complex problems, or come up with solutions?

Area 3: Youth voice and democratic participation

- How much do you feel able to participate in decisions that affect your future, such as the state of the planet?
- How much voice do young people have in cultural organisations and creative learning, so that it responds to their concerns and needs (e.g., about their futures / the Earth crisis)?

Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change

- Thinking about what is possible in 2027, if London's culture and creative sector has responded to the Earth crisis, what do you see?
- And to achieve this vision what would you ask influential organisations to do?

2.3 Reach

We sent the invitation to be heard by email to 220 people, including several networks and initiatives which have 1000s of members, and promoted it regularly on our social media platforms. We knew from experience that it is hard to recruit large numbers for engagement with the Earth crisis because, although of deep concern to the majority of people, it is not an easy or attractive subject. There was not enough budget to pay incentives, the timescale was short, and they needed to be living in or interested in London. We received 36 responses to our online recruitment survey, with a fairly even spread across age groups, and the largest occupation groups being creative practitioners/cultural workers. All that wanted to attend were invited to an online focus group.

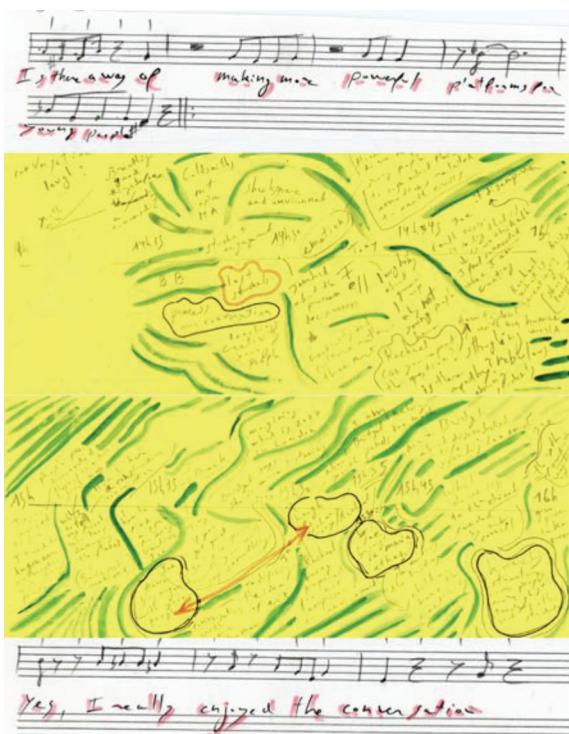
Six of the respondents preferred to be interviewed, and we also interviewed a further three people to include more teachers and young people.

In hope that we could invite a selection of people with different levels of concern about the crisis, we asked respondents to write a phrase to express their feelings about it. All 36, unsurprisingly, [expressed significant concern](#), ranging from a focus on solutions to expression of despair.

2.4 Focus group approach

We carried out three focus groups, one for Educators/Parents/Youth workers (5 x 22 years to retired) one for Cultural Workers (10 x 24 - 55 years) and one for Young People (9 x 16-22 years).

Each session opened with a Deep Listening exercise led by either Artur Vidal, Stephen Shiell or Hannah White. These allowed for attunement and a sense of calm, to be optimised for listening to each other. The Deep Listening practitioners then used their own listening and creative skills to produce a document based on what they heard in their session.



Graphic image, part of a sonic artwork created by Artur Vidal on listening to the session

We used Google Jamboards as the main tool for enabling participants to reflect and record their views. See the board for the [young people's focus group](#); for the Cultural workers group; and for the [Educators/parents group](#).

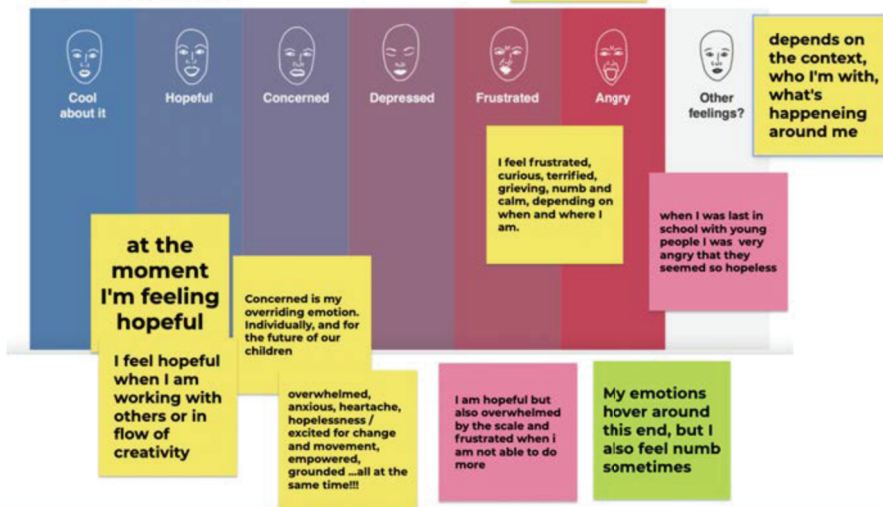
For the question about how culture and creative practice help explore and express emotions, we invited participants to reflect on their own emotions first, because emotions guide or divert our thoughts and actions. When faced with an overwhelming future crisis, they can cause reactions such as shut-down, retreat or aggression. They can also be highly changeable and mixed. We wanted participants to know that they could bring emotion into the whole conversation.

#climateemotions

When you think about the state of the planet, what do you most often feel?

Express your #climateemotions with words or images, leaving your post-it below

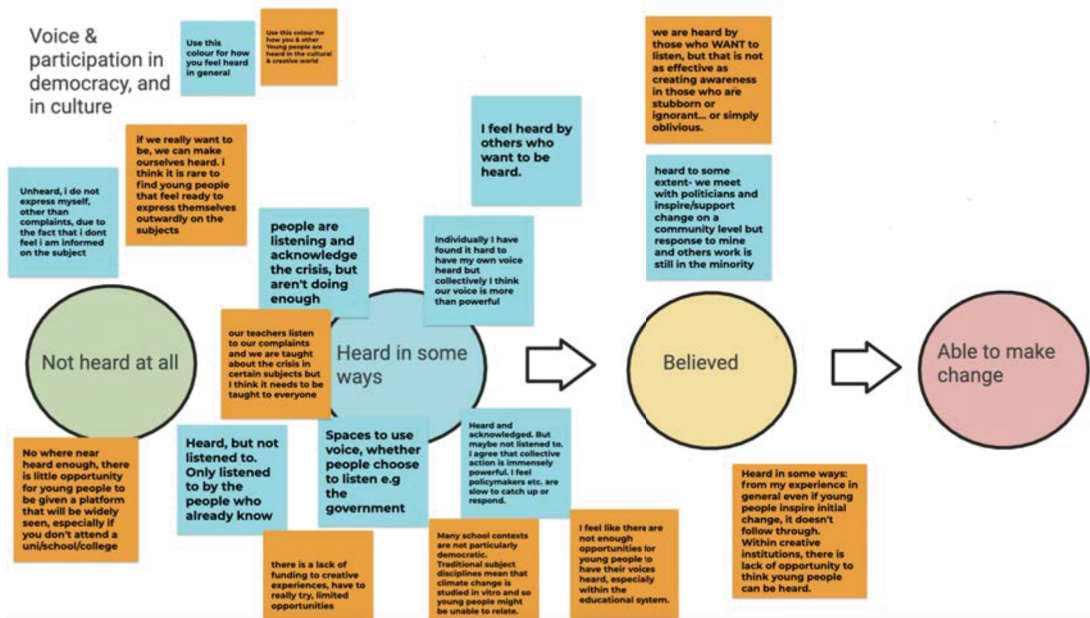
recently been feeling more frustrated, when usually feel hopeful



From young people's session

For the question about youth voice and democratic practice, we explained that being listened to depends on three factors, the first one being fundamental.

- Audibility: being heard in the right places, by the right people, free to speak truths
- Credibility: being believed, and people know you are speaking from experience or knowledge
- Consequence: having an impact, being in a position to make change based on that truth



From young people's session

For the question about how culture and creative practice could respond, we used a speculative future approach, inviting time travel to London in 2027. In retrospect, our focus group could have spent more time dreaming this scenario and letting discussion fall from it.

It's 2027. London's culture & creative practice are leaders in the response to the Earth crisis. What do you see?



From Cultural workers session

It is important to conclude every session that deals with the Earth crisis in a way that gives a sense of action and hope. We concluded by inviting participants to make a request to take action.

To reach this vision, what do you ask A New Direction, and cultural & education organisations, to do?



From Cultural workers session

3. Findings

3.1 Findings from our background research

See our [full interim report here](#), written before the consultation phase, which organised our thoughts based on our own knowledge and existing research or practice. Some headline findings from this early stage were:

Area 1: Emotions and the role of creativity

Creativity is helpful for emotional responses to the crisis

Emotions are articulations of our bodily responses to environmental and relational situations. Emotional expression is a key part of being ecocentric, and emotional intelligence is essential as the impacts of the Earth crisis affect us. As CYP grow up, they are less often in settings where they can be emotional and physical or respond to the challenges of their environment. This means they need even more encouragement and practice to be like this outside these settings, giving them freedom and resources to speak their views and to take action.

Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking

Creative learning needs better design for change-making outcomes

Critical thinking and creativity can enhance and generate ideas to mitigate and adapt to the Earth crisis, when these two modes are:

- combined and in balance;
- applied with an ecocentric mindset;
- being anticipatory of future threats and opportunities.

More opportunities are needed for both critical and creative modes to be explored in combination, and without excessive emphasis on one or the other. The education system is led by excessive criticality, so that new ideas or improvisations are repressed, and learners are continually expected to reflect on their own performance. This mindset corresponds to the linear, mechanistic approach dominant in society, which also results in disavowal of emotions felt at situational trauma such as inequalities and fears of climate futures.

Critical thinking and creativity are core capabilities in people for prefiguring a thriving future. However, these capabilities need to be developed in ways that are not top-down or didactic, that do not bracket out the geophysical realities of life, and that do not limit imagination of possibilities.

The most effective experiences involve speculation of possible futures, enabling encounters with people working on future problems, and access to new materials and platforms to design solutions.

Area 3: Youth voice, and democratic participation

Creative practice has a role

Putting young people's needs and views at the forefront includes supporting them to explore and express their emotions and visions.

There is lots of potential to tap into youth climate movements and to give agency to young people to lead cultural and creative work that changes systems to enable sustainable just futures.

Young people (aged 18-25) are more likely than older groups to think that marginalised groups are most impacted by climate change and choose this over the other interpretations of who it affects.³

³ Framing Climate Justice research, PIRC, 2021 <https://framingclimatejustice.org/findings#headline-237-44>

Environmental policy is fundamental to everything

Culture and Education could be framed as sitting *within* Environmental policy. Decisions that impact upon the *continuity* of life on Earth and the *quality* of life in places, connects in multiple ways across all issues affecting CYP.

Cultural organisations could do more to align to the mindsets of environmental organisations and movements.

A pragmatic approach to partnerships is to work with local governments on a place-based or bioregional approach, especially where they have declared an emergency.

The Every Child Matters drive attempted to join up policies across government and public bodies, so that needs of CYP could be met in an integrated way. Could this be redeveloped in context of the Earth crisis?

Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change

Creativity is a catalyst for socio-cultural change

Culture and creative practice is a vehicle for change in response to the Earth crisis in the following ways:

- Truth-telling and education
- Ambitious system-changing action
- Supporting community transition to sustainable lifeways
- Providing cultural therapy in a time of multiple crises
- Decolonising culture
- Decarbonising culture
- Ecological innovation
- Adapting to impacts.

For examples of all these areas of change-making, see our [Culture Takes Action](#) framework.

There are barriers to catalysing change

There's growing awareness in the culture sector that climate and political violence are entangled. Decarbonisation needs to be integrated with decolonisation efforts, and handled sensitively, but is too frequently dominated by white, privileged and technocratic voices.

The change-making power of culture and creative practice can be diminished by a lack of diversity, a lack of political support for change-making culture, and narrow definitions of culture. Culture and creative practice can expand and nuance ways of seeing a range of issues, but this success depends on expanding definitions of culture itself.

3.2 Findings from focus groups

Area 1: Emotions and the role of creativity

Talking to educators and parents

Their feelings were complicated by sympathies for the challenges young people face: *“Feeling hopeful when I’m in a situation like this but when with young people I find myself getting angry that they are unsupported, unmentored and struggling.”*

This group had diverse and complex views about the role of culture and creativity to help young people explore and express emotions. They debated definitions and framings of culture:

One said: *“There’s no specific focus with the Earth crisis, and there’s a struggle to bring it down to a human scale, to make it relatable. Theatre is about the human world, and relationships between humans, and by moving over to the non-human world...we’re not sure how to come in and approach it.”* Another felt differently as their own performance work is more fluid between human and more-than-human realms, and that the ecological world is more relatable than abstractions of the curriculum.

Their creative practice helps them feel hopeful: *“We’ve been brought up to feel isolated about this crisis, to be locked into our own minds, so creativity is so essential. When you’re immersed in your own creative world or collaborating with others on creative projects, you’re empowered to control what’s around you when the whole thing is that we feel disempowered.”*

Talking to cultural workers

This group were also less concerned to express their own emotions. They came with a lot of curiosity to find out what others thought, and practical intentions to respond to what young people need, and to grow their own ability to deal with this vast and vital topic.

They were all already sold on the role of Culture to help: *“Getting YP to engage with creative ideas to express their moods makes them feel they are less alone, and if they get together with other people to address them it can be sustaining.”* And *“If YP are invited to make something or express feelings, it invites them into dialogue. It opens up communication and gives validity to their ideas.”*

Many CYP naturally know how to handle their emotions or problems, because they can be more direct in desires to put things right: *“Young people are natural campaigners...My perception is that they have a super strong sense of justice, and the climate and biodiversity crisis is filled with stories of injustice that can strike a chord with them but they need creative tools to be able to do something about it.”*

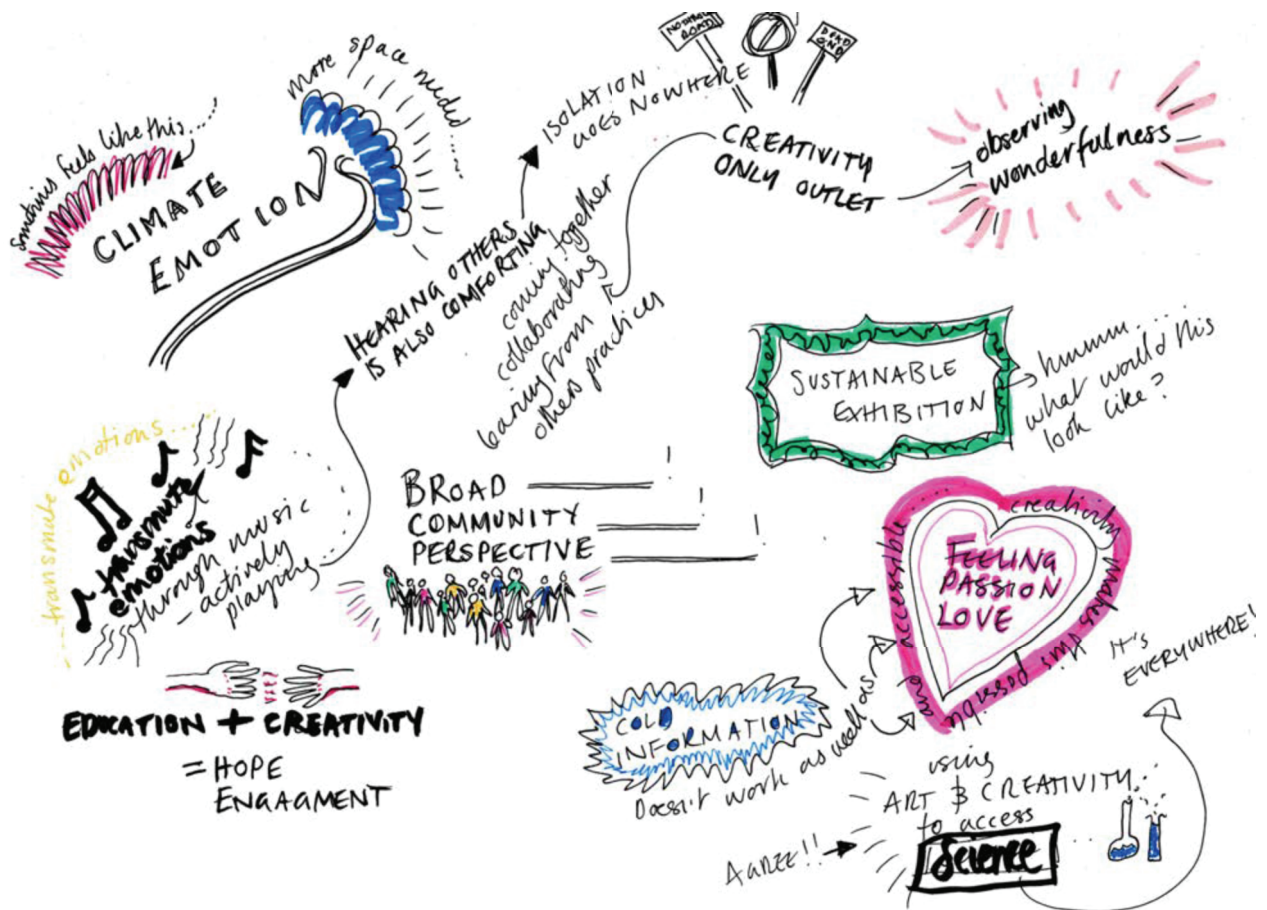
Talking to young people

All the young people expressed mixed emotions, summed up in the quote *“I’m sick with devastation but know the only way forward is to be hopeful.”*

They talked more freely than the adults did about how culture and creative practice helps them. It helps them cope with troubling emotions: *“Listening to and especially actively playing music helps me when I feel anxious about the future.”* It also helps them communicate ideas, stir emotion in others, and bring people together to make change:

- *“Creativity is my only outlet, being able to observe and present the wonderfulness of what we have left, and sustainable ways of being.”*
- *“Creativity is like the toolkit for change as it makes clear what you have to do, and inspires you to do it.”*
- *“It enables people to meet each other and interact, to come together, to create a space for collaboration around climate. My way of practicing is through culture, to bring people from different disciplines together, looking at different perspectives.”*
- *“Creative media has a unique potential to engage more people and make them care in a way that cold educational facts may not.”*

We asked if active making was more effective than ‘consuming’ culture, but they felt both were helpful. Creativity helps you express yourself, but hearing art by someone else with similar feelings can be comforting. Also, if you are creatively inclined, consuming it (e.g., science fiction) is a way into environmental science and solutions: *“Creativity has helped me learn about science.”*



Graphic illustration by Hannah White about young people’s session

Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking

We decided to prioritise the other three areas for our focus groups, due to limited time. We invited participants to add examples of practice and thoughts to a Google Jamboard but there were not many useful responses. A few points were raised. For example, the young people talked about how they wanted more integration of climate and environmental science into the arts.

"It needs to be taught across all subjects, not just in Geography, so that all those who don't do this subject can learn it. It should be a massive part of our education. We just need to be taught about all the ways we can change from now on".

Area 3: Youth voice and democratic participation

Talking to educators and parents

Educators and parents lean towards feeling 'not heard at all' and 'heard in some ways' with one person only feeling a sense of ability to make change with people closest to them.

Thinking of young people, they felt they don't have enough voice in culture and creative learning because of how it is conceived and structured:

"It's hard to find space within and outside of the curriculum for space and time to really address the Earth crisis. How can voices be heard if there is no space made for this?"

"The structures and expectations don't allow their authentic selves to be expressed."

"There aren't enough creative organisations in learning spaces that give people a voice to express their feelings about the Earth crisis."

They talked about how as adults they didn't always feel included themselves, although young people are more structurally excluded. One didn't know where to position themselves, as they felt both excluded from the (younger) protest movements and the (older) political mainstream. If cultural workers and educators are also unheard, with young people, how do they bridge the gap between supporting radical change and holding power?

One lamented that *"Young people say to me 'What's the point? The damage has been done. What can I do about it?'"* They discussed the challenges of having conversations with young people about the Earth crisis because when their mental health is precarious *"to put on top of the pandemic conversations about saving the planet is really difficult."* Another person felt that this block is the problem, that because we assume young people's fragility, we're failing to address the truth and connect them to hopeful, practical resources to make change. *"How do we choreograph some more positive imagining than negative reflecting?"*

Talking to cultural workers

This group shared the sense of educators / parents that young activists could be in generational silos: *"I think young people feel heard by each other, involved in creative production around protest...But the disconnect is between them protesting and being listened to outside their social bubble."*

They agreed that youth representation at governance level is vital. *“If they don’t have a seat at the table then the chances of those organisations holding lots of power and money responding fast enough to their concerns is very limited.”* There was agreement, however, that if the framing and recruitment of youth panels is based on limited assumptions of young people’s interests, such as digital technology, and on limited remits, such as growing youth audiences for culture, opportunities for catalysing change will be limited too.

YP need creative tools and learning about the Earth crisis, but their existing energy and confidence could be channeled: *“If so, many more young people have confidence to live their life publicly and broadcast their views [with digital tools not available to our generation], how could that be used differently?”*

However, educational structures reduce both creativity and active participation:

“YP feel they are in that worldwide community online but then in school it feels very narrow and local.” And, *“So many young people decide they’re not creative at year 8 and so the potential for voice and creative routes into change-making are closed off”.*

Young activists seeking platforms for change are up against industrial and denialist lobbies: *“While young people might seem to have more agency to speak with digital media, the forces of anti-climate, misinformation are massive. Young people’s agency is small compared to the might of the vested interests, the big tech companies, the pro-car lobby and so on. Any cultural response has to be mindful of this.”*

Some of this group were not optimistic in the face of barriers like this, and against the apathy of some to tackle a crisis through actions that require everything to change: *“Sometimes we might have to delve into the pessimism of failure.”*

Talking to young people

The young people were the most vocal group on this topic and feel less heard than the other groups who were more concerned for young people than for themselves. In general public contexts YP feel *“nowhere near heard enough. There is little opportunity for young people to be given a platform that will be widely seen, especially if you don’t attend a uni/school/college.”*

If they do feel heard, it is with caveats: *“We are heard by those who WANT to listen, but that is not as effective as creating awareness in those who are stubborn or ignorant... or simply oblivious.”*

Young people feel most heard by their friends, but they can also feel confident to speak with ‘near peers’. This led to the suggestion that cultural or educational projects could include near-peer ‘activism mentors’ (not just mentors to help you into work).

Reflecting on their voice in culture, several agreed there is potential for more creative and collaborative activism, which needs more funding: *“Individually I have found it hard to have my own voice heard but collectively I think our voice is more than powerful.”*

However, this group was most concerned with education, and less with cultural institutions, understandably given the many hours spent in education and its importance for them. Education would help inform less-engaged peers: *“My friends genuinely don’t know how they are contributing*

to the climate crisis..." And, "It needs to be taught across all subjects, not just in Geography, so that all those who don't do this subject can learn it. It should be a massive part of our education".

Education is also important to boost voice for those who are concerned: "It's been difficult to find confidence to make my voice heard because I don't think I'm informed enough. I know how to change in my personal life but beyond that, I don't really know."

But, education needs to become much more situated and meaningful because "climate education is taught in vitro which makes it difficult to relate to." This leads to a limited framing of environmental action, as being technical or about individual lifestyles: "There's a too authoritarian approach to climate education, and not enough discussion or playful ways in...the way it's delivered in education makes us feel like atomised individuals. It's not presented to us as us being a collective." Another person felt individualism was also important: "Young people having their own individual voice was missing in my education, so it could be nurtured in cultural practice. Personal voice and passion can come out from within the collective."



Graphic illustration from young people's session by Hannah White

Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change

Talking to educators and parents

One powerful vision for London in 2027, supported by others, was rewilding the arts, our minds as well as green spaces:

“Cross-generational, cross-institutional - free conversation across the city, redefining what art and creativity is...more artistic conversations with the non-human. Not just an obsessive need to be producing but understanding that in response to the Earth crisis there has to be a huge spaciousness to reflect and process.”

Embracing the wild can be about creative risk-taking: *“It’s easy to not see yourself as part of your environment. We disconnect because our environment is very tame. Thinking about that idea of risk and being prepared to be a bit more daring in our relationship with our environment, and not try to imprison it.”*

There was hope for what youth leadership of culture could achieve:

- *“Complete divestment from corporate sponsorship? Could young people make this happen?”*
- *“We need to take risks, and organisations need to take on board fresh ideas from young people and others that seem scary and abstract.”*
- *“Children always have seemingly crazy, huge ideas and we need to tap that. Get a primary school student in to help make decisions.”*

The discussion explored youth governance of cultural (and education) organisations and what would need to change for it to serve goals of catalysing a sustainable, just future. One idea was: *“What if youth programming was a single independent strand running across all cultural institutions? Democratically and collectively organised, run by and on behalf of young people.”*

Perhaps if young people drove London’s cultural planning we might see some exciting projects. For example: *“There’s a dedicated space - a museum/arts centre for the future and ecological solutions. A Museum of Tomorrow.”*

When asked what they asked for to make this happen, this group wants to see more widening of definitions of culture, more risk-taking, and less hierarchy and formality.

They suggest looking at practices in development charities such as Action Aid to consult young people to really ensure that services meet their needs in a fully rounded way.

Educational structures need to be radically changed to create long-term conditions for equality and collaboration, giving enough time to build agency: *“Agency is taken away from children right at the start, and that sense of agency needs to be built back up, earlier, not just after they’ve left.”*

Talking to cultural workers

In common with other groups, a key part of their vision for London in 2027 saw cultural provision integrated with outdoor and environmental projects: Forest School was cited as a good model for creative outdoor education because of its democratic practices.

They want to see more funding for nature-connected projects that link up with mental health provision, and projects that gently communicate environmental messages without increasing anxiety. Funding was seen as a key issue: *“We have to put a lot of pressure on funders...to radically rethink their missions and processes, to take risks and acknowledge the critical needs.”*

This led to talk about leveraging local authorities' support, because despite their financial difficulties they need citizen activism and collaboration to achieve their priorities: *"There's a big crossover between cultural organisations and local authorities. Lots of LAs have declared climate emergency and held youth summits...Now we see high street shops closing down even more. So what are the possibilities to bring nature connection and climate action into high streets and local green spaces? How can schools be engaged with that?"*

When asked how this can happen, their ideas focused on how to create more proactive opportunities for youth voice and wellbeing:

"Explore how young people can lead creative environmental policies in London." And "Coordinate also with those working with mental health and well-being around climate emergency and earth crisis. What do young people need to feel comfortable enough to be creative and empowered in this area?"

One participant wanted research and knowledge-sharing about contexts where young people feel comfortable to share, and occasions when adults tried to share power but it hasn't gone well.

There was a theme, in common with the other groups, of asking for a more ecocentric approach to culture: *"Work directly with experts in ecology, rewilding, permaculture, start rethinking about what art is, the relationship between art and the wild world."*

Talking to young people

This group was the most fluent about imagining a desirable future. Their visions for 2027 were less about the cultural sector as leader and more about a sustainable future for London. They imagine sustainable food, beehives, community gardens, cycle lanes and their own generation entering work with fresh ideas. Climate is integrated into education and cultural learning. Nature is integrated with life as a partnership. There is more collective, participatory democracy, and there is diverse representation.

Some further comments in the discussion:

- *"We won't be young in 2027, so we can be the next generation of teachers and mentors, teaching a way beyond consumerism."*
- *"I really hope there's more transparency and choice about more environmentally safe ways of consuming digital technologies."*
- *"More safe spaces, more clubs integrated into the school system, a place to feel accepted, open and confident in sharing what you feel." and "Making it more comfortable to talk about these issues. Making it not a bad thing to be part of activist groups."*

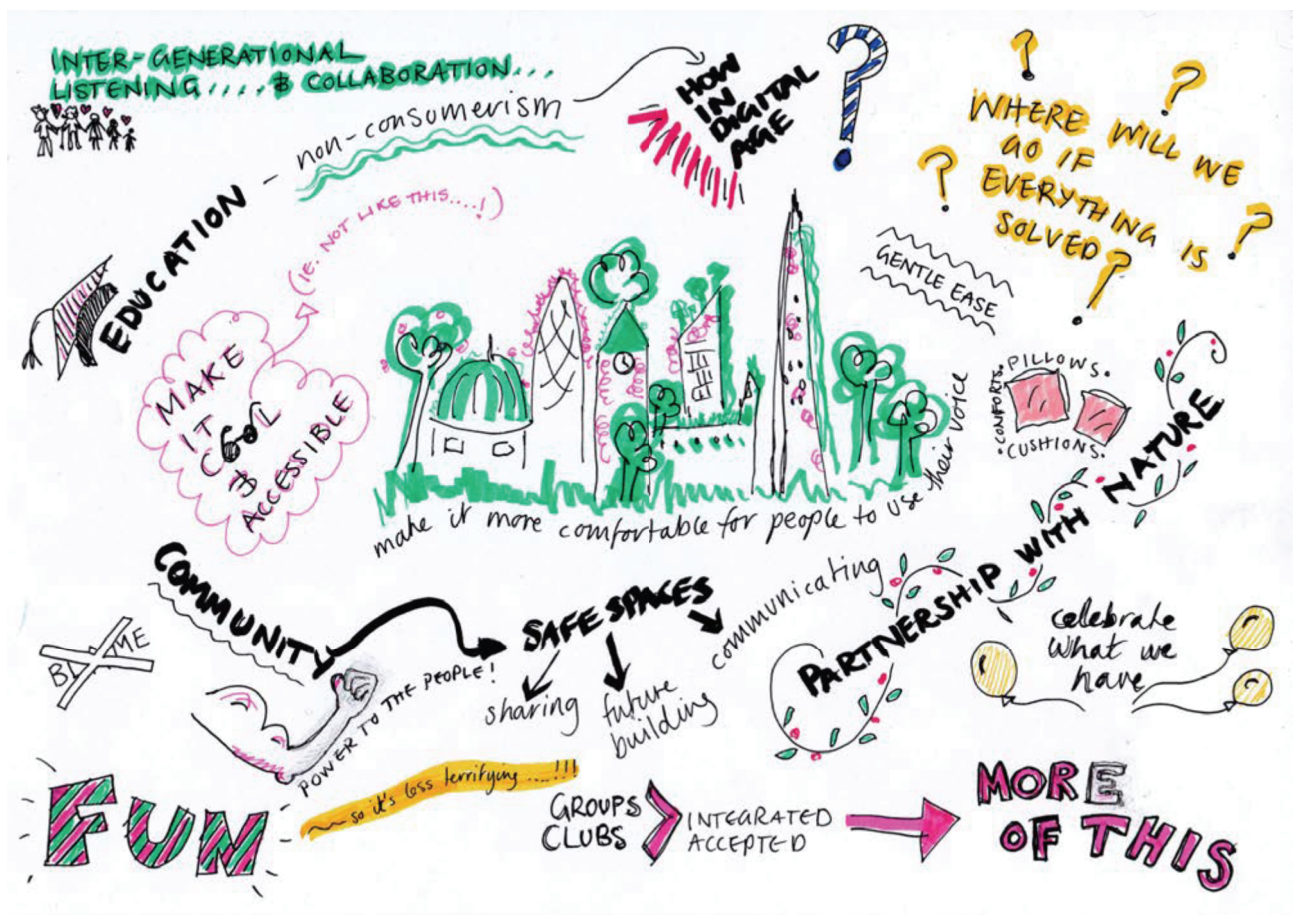
When asked how this can happen, a key request was creating friendly, inclusive, intergenerational cultural spaces where sustainable behaviours and ideas were integrated and normalised. *"Bring people with different opinions, from different generations, together in spaces designed for conversation"*.

They recognise that designing learning for both support and challenge is vital. *"If adults are educating about the Earth crisis, they must take care not to make it overwhelming and terrifying."*

But also, education must be true to be effective: “Give an understanding of personal day to day impact, in comparison to big destructive companies’ impacts (to realise it’s mass systematic change).”

Young people want help to maintain mental health while being activists. They want “sustainable escapism” and “to have fun, to have a mental break from it all” while still living sustainably and changing the system. They want change to happen smoothly: “People can feel they’re being shamed and prodded, it needs to be more gentle”.

They want climate to be central and normal in education and career advice: “We could help young people find career paths to continue their aspirations and earn money, from backgrounds where they don’t have financial support but still help the planet or work for good.” And “promote and support more opportunities for young people to create careers centred around loving the climate.”



Graphic illustration of young people’s session by Hannah White

3.3 Findings from interviews

We conducted eight one-to-one Interviews with a secondary headteacher, a Geography teacher, a SEND teacher, a youth climate arts programmer, an activist artist, community arts manager, an education researcher, and a young artist.

Area 1: Your emotions and experience of creativity and the Earth crisis

The conundrums of inclusion and nature-relationship were addressed by the SEND teacher, in relation to some of their students: *“They love spending time with animals, or just gardening...and it is on a very visceral non-intellectual level they are connecting...but they are also very reliant on plastics, they are very reliant on the system as it is – and it is very hard to educate YP quite forcefully about the environmental crisis when they are reliant on fresh stocks of plastic to keep them alive.”* She made useful points about how responses differ according to age, culture, gender and cognitive abilities. For example, they teach one group of MLD boys who can understand environmental issues but don't get emotional. Engagement tactics must be adjusted for different needs and interests.

Most adults we spoke to expressed supportive feelings about young people, angry on their behalf. The SEND teacher said, *“we all fetishize the wonderful children – ‘look at what the children are doing – don't you feel uplifted about the future’ and I just get really cross because they shouldn't have to do that.”*

Another theme was the need to protect but challenge in quite extreme ways in both directions: *“There is a real balance between wanting to look after kids and actually shield them from a lot of stuff and wanting them to be empowered to make choices and to get involved in the fight as well because ultimately we need to get on with it, don't we?”* SEND teacher

There is good practice in how to manage this, which can be learned from: *“It is a delicate balance. The YP don't come in and lead the show in our programmes. We have lots of people for them to learn from. It's very collaborative. It's not like ‘we're teaching you, then you're soaking it in’. We offer opportunities.”* Youth climate arts programmer

The young person talked about how peers aware of the Earth crisis are very good at supporting each other and using creative approaches to self-care: *“We have a weekly zoom group where we do a meditation and check in and share ideas for being well.”* They feel most comfortable doing this in their own generational group, as *“older people might sympathise, but they didn't have these pressures”* but at the same time they are respectful of the wisdom and support from older people.

Area 2: The role of creativity and critical thinking

The Geography teacher shared examples of how she used creative approaches, to increase understanding of a complex subject, to help them navigate emotions, while building skills in speaking truth to power:

“I think culture and creative learning are really useful in helping students navigate emotions about the Earth crisis. The Earth crisis is a global crisis and very daunting/upsetting for lots of students - the impacts are real, we explore the evidence in Geography and students understand that now is the time to act. It is a significant crisis for students to engage with and being as creative as possible is useful in helping them navigate their emotions; whether it is a speech, a role play, a piece of artwork, a poem or a rap.”

The educators talked of the challenges with the current curriculum, reducing chances for critical thinking and problem-solving that is so important in dealing with real-world complex environmental

challenges. The headteacher saw opportunities for this in Geography: *“That is the key to terrific teaching - that you set out a problem and teach students to be discriminating in their research, to be analytical and synoptic in their thinking, you ask them to synthesise their ideas and come up with what they think their hypothesis is.”*

However, teachers of other subjects feel constrained. The SEND teacher said: *“Now it is very much about you show them the exam requirements, and the mark scheme and they work out that you teach them to meet those criteria,”* and *“we want to be doing that and bringing in environmental stuff, and the ecotherapy stuff, but we haven’t got the time – we are not allowed to – it is not our job.”*

They suggested that cultural organisations could do more to enable critical thinking, by providing experiences and resources.

Area 3: Youth voice and democratic participation

The headteacher is very supportive: *“It is the students who are leading on stuff, creating ways to educate others [e.g., a magazine] our student leadership team and our school council. I think the seeds of change are very much with those individuals and it is really important to see that important work.”* They felt the school’s role was to guide them into more mainstream routes of activism, to integrate their activism into all realms of work and to see their vocal calls for change applied to their lifestyles.

The youth climate arts programmer spoke about how youth leadership of their organisation has increased their understanding of intersectionality and how it resonates for others: *“Being able to frame the crisis in an intersectional way is helpful. Taking it away from the global warming facts, talking about the climate justice issues, that has really resonated. They can put it into their own framework so it makes sense to them in their situation and connects with their emotions.”*

Young environmentalists can feel that opportunities for voice or cultural leadership don’t give room for climate or ecology issues. The young person said *“although I was lucky to go to a creative school, my friends who didn’t go there have become creative despite their education. My school was all about justice issues through the arts, but climate didn’t really figure in that. Maybe it was seen as too big for us to do anything about. Maybe it’s because the teachers didn’t understand how tied up it was with the inequalities and race stuff they did projects on. So, I’ve had to learn about climate and nature despite my school.”*

The education researcher wanted to see more support for young voices speaking to decision-makers and managers: *“There needs to be more ability for voices to be heard outside of their context.”*

The community arts manager talked of how creative and youth projects were linked to the council’s work on outdoor spaces and nature. This local level collaboration is important for YP to see how they can change their environment through speaking and acting. *“There is this cross communication between all sorts of different organisations that has to happen to make this work, to inspire young people to know that their voice counts a lot, and to know that they have a right to an opinion that is different from the older people in their life.”*

Area 4: Culture and creative practice as a vehicle for positive change

The community arts manager wants to see more clarity about message and purpose in environmental arts: *“Often the arts can be used as a box ticking thing...showing how much everyone is thinking about the environment – and its ‘oh look but we have this project about trees’ or ‘we have this youth play about oil’. They can be not actually very impactful or used very efficiently.”* They described a project set in the vast Atlantic gyre of plastic, but the core message was about slave labour. It was confusing.

The SEND teacher wants to address the limited views on careers that make environmental work invisible and low status: *“There are so many jobs in nature, and in agriculture, but in my experience it is so pigeonholed as something that low-ability students do.”*

They suggested that London could create its own ‘wellbeing for the future’ curriculum inspired by Wales as a model: *“Wales is a real model – have a look at the welsh curriculum – they have said there is no future in this rigid curriculum, we are going to do everything on creativity and critical thinking.”⁴*

4. Conclusion and calls to action

4.1 Summary of themes

Don't bracket out the Earth crisis

There were strong calls for the Earth crisis to be placed front and centre in the curriculum, cultural practices and the wider media and politics. They want the crisis to be taken seriously and treated holistically. They want its systemic root causes to be understood as the same root causes of the major ills affecting society, including the pandemic. The existential threat to future generations should drive all decision-making, and so young people should be involved in genuine ways and empowered to contribute to system change to sustain life on the planet. This means helping them to develop capacities to be adaptive system changers, by supporting generative knowledge through engaging with real situations and problems.

Carefully design opportunities to explore it

Although the Earth crisis needs to be more acknowledged, it needs to be treated in ways that feel comfortable and playful, and this points to the role of cultural organisations. The young people asked for friendly, fun and inclusive cultural spaces where sustainable behaviours and ideas were integrated and normalised. All want to see more intergenerational opportunities for shared learning, while young people also feel most comfortable with peers and near-peers.

⁴ This is supported by the Welsh Wellbeing for Future Generations Act, implemented from 2015.

While cultural organisations can play a key role here, schools and colleges are where CYP spend most time. There were calls for curriculum reform to put ecological capacities, Earth sciences and futures literacy across all subjects, including the arts.

Because everyone shared the value of culture and creative practice for widening and enhancing learning, this wasn't a major subject of debate. Barriers need to be unlocked for more cultural provision addressing the Earth crisis and nature connection, putting it more centrally in cultural policies and funders' priorities.

Don't pigeonhole or burden young people

Young people do not have homogenous feelings, thoughts and behaviours about the Earth crisis. Their responses vary according to age, context and capacities. Young climate activists feel very different from peers who aren't so aware, and don't like their generation to be pigeonholed as 'climate warriors' or burdened with the role of saving the planet.

Individualism or collectivism

Some felt that culture and education need to shift from individualism (e.g., 'getting on in life') and that more collectivism would help solve environmental problems. However, creativity has particular power in engaging people at individual and emotional level. Digital culture offers routes to making sustainable mindsets more appealing and motivating. Culture and creative practice can enable individual expression and identity formation, and help young people find alternatives to consumerist addictions and towards planet-kind vocations. Culture is about both individuals and groups, connecting together: *"Culture is important as it focuses on how we have a 'group' or cultural responsibility to act to address this crisis, this sense of unity and collective action can be useful for young people in making them feel united, rather than alone."*

Knowledge brings confidence to speak

If YP are always assumed to be too fragile to cope, this can stop adults addressing the truth and connecting them to hopeful, practical resources to make change.

YP asked for more opportunities to learn and develop skills for activism and greener livelihoods, to make their calls to action more credible and consequential. They want adults to imagine the future more as they do, as a world of profound uncertainty and possibility. They need this anticipation of ecological crisis to be integrated into how education, careers and creative practices are conceived.

Trauma-sensitive teaching and parenting

Cultural workers, educators and parents are struggling with the enormity of the challenge, with a strong sense of injustice and inadequacy to support and educate CYP in this context. Parents are more aware of the limitations of the education system as the pandemic has thrown them into a closer relationship with it, and, with many teachers, are asking for CYP's wellbeing to be paramount. The adults we spoke to feel almost as voiceless as young people do, because they need more skills and freedoms to address the Earth crisis and the traumas arising from it. How do they bridge the gap between supporting radical change and their own needs to maintain livelihoods and hold power?

Meaningful youth voice requires more profound awareness of needs

Cultural programmes and creative education can offer more freedom and platform for youth voice than other areas (e.g., science or sport). If the framing and recruitment of youth panels is based on

limited assumptions of young people's interests such as digital technology, and on limited remits such as growing youth audiences for culture, opportunities for catalysing change and tackling injustice will be limited too.

Youth voice can be diminished through poorly designed cultural practice that treats Earth crisis issues superficially, without clarity or without commitment.

Sustainable cultural learning is intersectional and ecological

All groups wanted best practice to be promoted and funded, which meets human and environmental needs in intersectional and ecocentric ways. If youth leadership on this is supported, it is likely to arise from motivations for justice, and an awareness of how racism, inequality and environmental harm intersect.

A common theme across all groups was nature connection and green place-shaping as a positive route to imagining and building a thrivable future. Culture and creative practice has a key role to play in *“the framing of that imagination through our relationship with nature. The ecological stories contained in any place is something that culture can richly pursue on a local scale and a grander scale.”*

4.2 Calls to action

Advocate sustainable cultural learning to funders and policymakers

Ask funders and policymakers to support cultural opportunities for CYP to learn about the causes, impacts and solutions of the Earth crisis, and to develop skills for system-changing activism and aspirations for greener livelihoods. The complex environmental challenges facing CYP can be levered as an opportunity to advocate the value of cultural and creative learning.

Plan to build professional capacity for sustainable cultural learning

Develop training for cultural workers and educators to grow their skills in supporting and challenging CYP with these complex challenges, to navigate needs to be truthful, protective and positive, and to carefully adjust this work for different needs and interests. Outcomes of this training could be the co-design of friendly, fun and inclusive cultural spaces and occasions where sustainable behaviours and ideas are integrated and normalised.

Encourage visible statements of commitment

Cultural organisations have a duty due to their public role and visibility. *“How many cultural organisations have an overt climate strand of work with the public? How many have learning programmes that always have climate and ecology? [How many] have a statement about their systemic role as an environmentally aware and progressive organisation through every element of their being?”*

Encourage London's cultural organisations and creative departments to declare emergency and make visible statements. Their action plans need to be broad across:

- educating themselves and audiences about the Earth crisis
- becoming resilient as shocks hit, including decarbonisation
- enabling youth activism and agency

- supporting direct action for social and environmental justice.

Explore multi-solving cultural initiatives for London

- Model or promote ideal initiatives that create connections and mutually beneficial outcomes across culture, education, health, employment and environment, focused on London's places.
- Encourage cultural organisations to collaborate, for example, with youth-led environmental movements or with local authorities to deliver environmental policies.
- Connect with plans for the Lewisham Borough of Culture with its focus on climate, ecology and sanctuary for migrants.
- Consider a mentoring scheme to support young people into creative activism and sustainable creative livelihoods. (See the call for 250,000 green apprenticeships.⁵)
- An ideal initiative could be a revival of the Every Child Matters agenda, led by a consortium of London boroughs and a board of young people, in which the Earth crisis and its impacts on CYP today and future generations is fully acknowledged.

5. Appendix

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Our background research report: [Cultural learning and the Earth crisis](#)

Responses to a question in our recruitment survey: [What phrase sums up your feelings about the Earth crisis?](#)

Jamboards from each focus group:

[Educators and parents](#)

[Creative and cultural workers](#)

[Young people](#)

More about Climate Museum UK <https://climatemuseumuk.org/why/>

Some earlier research that informed this report:

- [Mapping the Future with 3 Lenses](#), Bridget McKenzie, November 2020 (written 2019)
- [Anticipating Change for Cultural learning](#), Bridget McKenzie, May 2020
- [Cultural Organisations for Regenerative Culture](#), Bridget McKenzie, April 2020
- [Future Views Toolkit](#), Bridget McKenzie / Flow Associates, 2017

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/mar/02/uk-urged-to-create-green-apprenticeships-to-help-covid-recovery>