Young London now: An introduction to the 2021 Listening Projects

By Sarah B Davies

reset

A NEW DIRECTION
We create **opportunity**

"Life as we knew it was stripped away, and we had no choice but to adapt"

(Young Londoner participating in one of five Listening Projects)

In January 2021, A New Direction commissioned the Listening Projects; a rapid sense-making process which built on the wider literature coming out in a rapidly changing context. The Listening Projects aimed to hear and learn about the impact of Covid-19 and events in 2020 on our key stakeholder groups. These projects captured reflections and ideas on five themes: the experience of young Londoners over this time; the experience of organisations leading creative education practices; how culture and creative learning might respond to the Earth emergency; enabling cultural communities; and employment and work.

Five partner organisations shaped the research to involve a series of conversations with young people, educationalists, organisations and families. Each research project explored environments, spaces and listening methodologies to gather a rich range of perspectives. This helped create vital recommendations and calls for action within each theme that are essential as we move out of the pandemic.

Through these five Listening Projects we begin to build a picture of young London now and the landscape today for those working to support young people through creativity and culture. This paper introduces the five published Listening Projects and draws together some of the key priorities emerging across the pieces.

"Put simply, we need to normalise the idea that young people should have their say in the affairs that concern them as part of the decision-making process."
(Aweo Group)

About the Listening Projects

Across the projects, the research partners considered different digital tools and online platforms to deliver a combination of focus groups, individual interviews, workshops, roundtables and creative exploration. The research captures the voices of children, young people, parents, freelancers, and employed staff across a broad range of cultural organisations and institutions, as well as education settings and local authorities. These research participants used their experience and knowledge to speak out about the vision of young people, creating urgent messages in the context of now.

It is important to acknowledge the range of methods and voices in the research and the areas of specialism the research partners brought to the projects. This presents different contexts and filters, in language and a valuable range of different perspectives to learn from.

Aweo Group explored the experience of the events of 2020 for young Londoners. They conducted interviews and group discussions and worked with organisations who serve young people in order to reach young Londoners in their pre-planned sessions and gatherings. They uncovered five main priorities that young people feel need urgent attention: the impact of Covid-19, Black Lives Matter, mental health, climate change, and gaps in education. The importance of creative initiatives and self-led expression through new platforms emerged, particularly in support of mental health and impactful youth voice.

B & G Partners explored creative practices and the impact on organisations support-ing cultural learning. A survey, one to one interviews and two roundtable discussions were conducted for people across a wide range of creative specialisms, experience, cultural backgrounds and London regions. Through this research participants spoke about acceleration and innovation evident during the pandemic, as well as the urgent need to address equity. They considered the future within the context of a sector-wide recovery, concluding that creative education needs to fulfil a greater role in the new reality we find ourselves in.

Climate Museum UK explored the response of young Londoners and cultural workers to the Earth emergency. Taking the wider perspective in which the pandemic emerged from ecological decline, and anticipating worsening climate impacts in future, the research explored the needs of young people and the role of cultural learning. Three focus groups were conducted: one for educators, parents and youth workers, one for cultural workers and one for young people. Through Deep Listening, digital tools and creative exercises, the important role of creativity for exploring emotions around this topic was uncovered, as well as the new need for youth voice and the potential for creative practice as a vehicle for change.

New Local set out to learn what it might take to enable new creative communities. They conducted conversations with young people and those who work closely with them in the creative and cultural sector. Key insights included the importance of young people being able to influence decisions in their local area, the urgent need to address inequality and the role that creativity can play in supporting young people. They found that partnerships and local leadership were priorities for supporting the sort of change young Londoners need now.
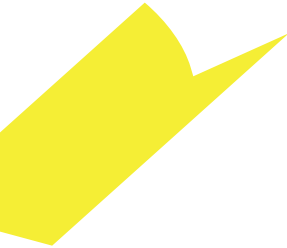
Rocket Science explored employment and work and the impact of the pandemic on work prospects for young people. They brought together organisations committed to creative practices and youth employment for interviews and a stakeholder roundtable. They also trained young people in peer research who co-facilitated a roundtable for other young people. Six themes emerged through these discussions: the impact of Covid-19; technological advancement and digital skills; the rise of insecure work; lack of diverse recruitment; job availability; and support for young people. They also explored future issues for the sector.

"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." (New Local)
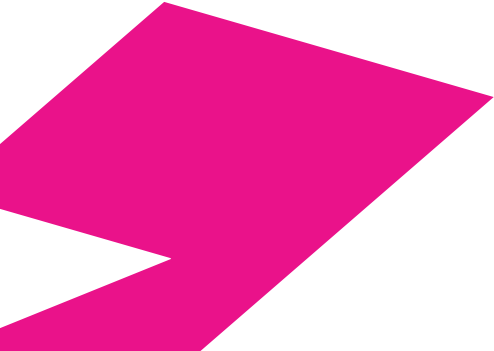
Key priorities emerging

The Listening Projects draw out an energising range of calls for action and thematic recommendations from young people and those who support them. There was a strong collective view of the future that was about having greater autonomy; young people being independent change makers, in control of their own narrative; and employing creativity to aid this. In this future there would be greater trust between organisations and young people and greater representation within these organisations and the sector more widely.

To help us get there, six key priorities surfaced across the projects; things that need to change to both move the sector forward and support young people in their autonomy. Implicit throughout these priorities are questions around relationship-building, power and how power is shared in order to support the needs of young people as we move out of the pandemic.

- **Redefine creative practices:** Embrace and harness new definitions of creativity (including digital practices) that have developed and evolved during the pandemic and are owned by young people.

- **Pay attention:** Listen and respond meaningfully to young voices, affording young people new powers to be independent, influence decisions and enact change. This involves placing greater importance on relationship-building, creating a feedback loop, being accountable, being versatile and open, and thinking of ways to develop youth leadership.

- **Stay local:** Develop local-level approaches over regional ones, for supporting communities and young people, developing talent and strengthening local democracy.

- **Advocate:** Use our powers for advocacy - for young people who feel the weight of a negative perception of youth in lockdown; and for the importance of creative practices and cultural education, which can play a key role as we re-emerge. This includes using digital technology and social media effectively and also includes young people being given the opportunity to become advocates themselves.

- **Work together:** Develop new partnerships and networks to create a collective package of support for young people, sharing resources within the sector. This might include collaborative listening to create co-produced knowledge of how to support change. Organisations also talked about coming together more as a sector to campaign better.

- **Include:** Address how accessible we really are, challenge historic underrepresentation, diversify our recruitment, and analyse intersectionality in order to know how to increase social mobility to create necessary change.

"It is important not to shy away from difficult conversations around issues of class, race and discrimination" *(Young participant in New Local's research)*
"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 and narrow definitions of culture." *(Climate Museum UK)*

In addition, the Listening Projects surfaced important ideas about connection outside of the arts, at a practice and policy level. For example, enabling young people's involvement in the design of wider local services, including housing, planning and regeneration *(New Local's research)*; and the potential benefits of aligned initiatives across environment, culture, education, health and employment in progressing responses to the Earth emergency *(Climate Museum UK).*

New support for young Londoners
"Young people explained that it is no longer acceptable to give 'a blanket service, organisations need to be versatile and able to fulfil the needs of different young people or signpost these young people to organisations who can support them best'." *(Aweo Group)*

Listening and responding to these current priorities requires a supportive approach where relationship-building is integral, to help realise the autonomy that young Londoners feel they deserve. Reading across all five Listening Projects, three forms of support come through compellingly: mentoring, support for mental health and provision of spaces and platforms.

Mentoring
Mentoring was frequently recognised as a vital way to use our experience and networks as a support structure for young people. Across the research this included a range of themes and achieved a range of outcomes.

Mentoring plays a key role in learning about work and career opportunities, introductions to supportive and creative networks and developing confidence and skills. Representative role models are more important than ever.

"Collaborating with creative and cultural organisations, creative youth organisations and creative employability organisations to provide mentoring will enable young people to access existing networks which in turn will make work more accessible for them.... But it is important these networks are equitable and do not rely on exclusive connections" *(Rocket Science)*

Additionally, there is also an opportunity for intergenerational mentoring; for young people this would be effective in closing the generational gaps created by the pandemic and negative impression of young people created by social media.

A number of young people also explored the idea of "near-peer" mentoring, young people sharing their experiences with younger people. It is also an opportunity for changing traditionally held notions of who holds knowledge and experience, e.g. tech-savvy young people could potentially support cultural organisations with new technical and digital knowledge.

Mentoring could also work at place-level, supporting creative place-making and change through local leaders mentoring young people, enabling them to play an active role in their local area.

Mentoring could be an important ingredient for ensuring we are inclusive and actively open to listening to younger voices, and offers a vital opportunity for being accountable.

Support for mental health

Mental health coming out of the pandemic was recognised across the Listening Projects, echoing broader social research at this time. Many participants noted the urgent need to respond to individual mental health needs as we transition back into the world and consider environmental resolutions, as well as build community wellbeing as we reconnect once more.

The role of creative practices was seen as important, providing an opportunity to play, create and to "represent how we see the world." Embracing new definitions of creativity would allow expressions to happen in any form. Through the research we might also interpret a demand for a change in how creativity is valued, not least in education.

"Unfortunately the mental health crisis is converging with an increasing educational attainment gap... should the emphasis be on helping young people catch up on all the learning that they've missed, or more on helping them make the difficult mental and emotional transition back into the world?" (B & G Partners)

Links between poor mental health and environmental anxiety were also explored: is there the potential for drawing on links between wellbeing, creativity and environmental action?

Provision of spaces and platforms

"More safe spaces... a place to feel accepted, open and confident in sharing what you feel." (Young participant in Climate Museum UK's research)

The need for informal, safe spaces or "third spaces" — neither school nor home — *(B & G Partners)* was frequently spoken about before the pandemic but appears to be even more vital for young people now, as places to explore fluid interests, process events and reconvene over ideas or occurrences. These safe spaces should provide for diversity of needs and backgrounds, especially in the context of places and services that have closed which would usually serve young people. Across the projects it was clear that dedicated physical spaces could play an important role in developing creative energy and platforming youth voice. Others talked of the new digital potential: could these spaces also operate in the digital sphere, harnessing and platforming the new creativity evident in lockdown and using voice through social media as a vehicle of change? Can these spaces also provide platforms for being heard and for us to listen?

"More safe spaces... a place to feel accepted, open and confident in sharing what you feel." (Young participant in Climate Museum UK's research)

"Many young people... 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 feel a part of." *(New Local)*

These priorities may not seem new. Indeed, they have been written about in the past as strategies for supporting young people. But through the act of listening we have learned that mentoring, supporting mental health and providing safe spaces and platforms have gained greater value and importance as we come out of the pandemic. These models of support may also provide some practical ideas around the complex issues of sharing power.

On listening and being heard

One of the key learnings from the Listening Projects is the value of truly listening and the need for more of this to take place. If we are listening well we are empathetic, taking on board a range of experiences and building understanding with which to respond. It is the attitude for being ready to respond (to evaluate, adjust, adapt) that sets effective listening apart.

This approach comes from a position of caring. Caring for someone crosses into the multifarious aspects of their life: their experiences, their locality, their rights of access to services and culture. Indeed, through the Listening Projects what is clear is a call for a radical form of care, within "communities, mental health, and making the transition back into school, the world." *(Listening Projects researcher)*. Being listened to can be empowering and can be a catalyst for change. But there needs to be an atmosphere of care, duty and safety and a sense that voices will be truly heard. In this sense listening needs to come from a position of giving away power. This goes further than the widely accepted opinion that young people should have a voice, and demands for their voice to "have consequence" in the context of now. This is called for, implicitly or explicitly, across all five projects.

Concluding comments

The priorities that emerge from the Listening Projects will feed into A New Direction's future planning and activity. But we think these Listening Projects speak beyond our own organisation and can support the practices of others working to empower young Londoners through this time.

The voices of young people cannot be ignored and neither can the opinions of those within the rich ecology that supports young people, creativity and culture in the city. Now is the time to listen as we rebuild and reset.

To find out more about A New Direction's Listening Projects and to read the individual reports, head to: **www.anewdirection.org.uk/listening-projects**

This work forms part of **Reset**, A New Direction's programme of support in response to the pandemic. Though COVID-19 has caused huge disruption to our lives, our professions, and our learning, it is important to remember that we are resilient, strong and good at what we do.

We know that we can adapt and work differently, move quickly and innovate. Let's take this chance to reset and move forward with what we know works, leave behind what doesn't, and introduce new ways of working, together.