

# Young London now: An introduction to the 2021 Listening Projects

By Sarah B Davies







- **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”, 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](http://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.