

# Youth participation through music

## The development of Wired4Music: the music council for young Londoners



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WIRED4MUSIC

## ABSTRACT

Wired4Music is the music council for young Londoners, established by Sound Connections and launched in 2010. The programme uses principles of democratic participation to place young people aged 16-25 at the heart of Sound Connections' work, and gives them a platform from which to shape their musical experiences and advocate for young people's voice to the wider music sector.

This briefing paper describes how the principles of democratic participation can be applied in a musical context. The thinking draws on key theories of young people's democratic participation, and our own reflections and evidence-gathering whilst developing and managing the programme with my colleague Nicky Dewar over the last five years. The paper explains the process through which Wired4Music was developed, the benefits this has had for young people and the lessons we have learned.

As well as developing Wired4Music, we have also worked in close consultation with a number of partner organisations to explore how they can involve young people in shaping their cultural experiences. We hope the learning we share in this paper will ultimately show how even more organisations across the cultural sector could consult and empower young people to have a voice and take the lead.

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# 1. What is youth participation?

## 1.1 Defining youth participation

Participation, often referred to as democratic participation, is *“a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change”* (Treseder 1997 cited in Kirby et al., 2010). Youth participation extends this idea to the involvement of children and young people in shaping their own experiences.

Youth participation takes as its focal point the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – Article 12, as well as the Children Act 1989, the Health & Social Care Act 2001 and the Education Act 2002. The Children and Young People’s Unit (2011) state that participation should occur where individual decisions are being taken about children’s own lives, where services for children are being provided or where national policies are being developed.

When discussing youth participation, we are often talking about a diverse range of inter-related approaches. These include:

- **youth engagement and inclusion** – engaging young people in activities to develop them personally or socially, academically or professionally
- **youth consultation** - asking young people what they think about activity, policy or issues but not necessarily involving them in making changes
- **youth voice** - giving young people a say on activities, services and policy
- **youth leadership** - this could be seen as a later stage of the process, where young people are empowered to lead activity or influence services or policy directly and/or independently. The focus here would be on transference of responsibility and decision-making to young people
- **youth governance** - where young leaders join adults on boards or at higher levels in organisations in a joint decision-making position.

An important model for ‘measuring’ youth participation is Roger Hart’s Ladder of Participation, introduced in a report for the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in 1992. The ladder is used to describe the phases that projects may go through – from non-participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) to a position where young people and adults share decision-making. The ‘ladder’ is organised on eight rungs with the highest level of participation at the top:

| <i>Participation:</i>     |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 8                         | Young people and adults share decision-making       |
| 7                         | Young people lead and initiate action               |
| 6                         | Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people |
| 5                         | Young people consulted and informed                 |
| 4                         | Young people assigned and informed                  |
| <i>Non-participation:</i> |   |
| 3                         | Young people are tokenized                          |
| 2                         | Young people are decoration                         |
| 1                         | Young people are manipulated                        |

## 1.2 Youth participation in London

London benefits from a highly developed youth participation infrastructure. Several organisations and networks exist to support youth engagement and participation across the city including London Youth, the Young Londoners' Participation Network and the Partnership for Young London, as well as the Greater London Authority's Peer Outreach programme. These sit alongside national organisations and initiatives, such as the British Youth Council and the National Youth Agency, as well as a range of political and international development initiatives linked to parliament, the Commonwealth and major charities. Youth boards operate across many London boroughs, giving young people a voice on local issues. However, these groups do not have a specific focus on music, or the arts and culture more widely, although some may promote the arts as part of their agenda.

## 1.3 Youth participation in the arts

In the arts sector, participatory approaches are commonplace. Indeed, youth arts have long championed the use of participatory techniques to increase access and promote inclusion. Music education projects, especially in the non-formal or community sector, are often participatory by their very nature, encouraging creative and collaborative approaches to teaching and learning. In many cases, young people may be consulted about the content of a project or be given the opportunity to produce their own event. Less commonly, young people may be given the opportunity to form their own youth boards or be invited to take part in governance or steering groups.

However, whilst young people are often given the opportunity to shape content or in some cases, contribute to high level discussions, it is less common to find young people in arts organisations participating in strategic decision-making or shaping campaigns about the programmes and services of which they are the ultimate beneficiary.

However, despite a diverse array of approaches, the central message of participation itself – the right of the child or young person to shape their own experience – may be lost. Sometimes we simply forget to listen to what young people are saying, believing that 'adults know best'.

Often, other considerations, such as capacity, budget or day-to-day practicalities, may take precedent. At an organisational level, barriers to youth participation include a lack of commitment or capacity to implement longer term or more profound changes.

Furthermore, many organisations using participatory practices may not outwardly recognise, acknowledge or publicise that they are doing so. As a result, participation may be under-employed or under-reported – its benefits often not disseminated as part of the marketing or evaluation of a project.

Ultimately, the extent to which youth participation, voice and leadership can be encouraged will depend on the abilities, commitment, resources and 'buy in' of each organisation, their staff, and the young people themselves. The youth arts sector is dedicated to enhancing the lives of young people, creatively and socially. We can go further, by putting young people at the heart of shaping their own cultural experiences.

## 2. Spotlight on Wired4Music

### 2.1 Wired4Music: aims, structure and content

Five years ago, Sound Connections was working with a diverse range of young people across London but had no formal processes in place to hear participants' views first hand, or any means by which they could influence their own music provision. This is what we set out to address and test by developing Wired4Music. Sound Connections began developing the Young Londoners' Music Council in 2009 and officially launched the programme in March 2010 as Wired4Music. The stated aims are:

- To give young people a voice on music-making and music policy in London
- To place young people at the heart of Sound Connections' work
- To share learning about youth participation with the wider music, arts and youth sectors.

The council currently has a membership of over 400 young people with a core 'board' of around 30 regularly attending members who are involved in the running of the programme. Wired4Music is overseen by a Programme Manager and Programme Coordinator, and members work with the whole Sound Connections team, sitting on steering groups, assessment panels and working in the office. The Wired4Music Mission Statement sets out the members' aims and ambitions. The timeline of developing the council is described opposite.

Wired4Music activity covers three inter-related areas:

#### Consultation & advocacy

Wired4Music's primary aim is to consult and advocate for youth-influenced music-making and cultural policy. The backbone of the programme is a series of quarterly council meetings which take place at a range of venues across London, from Nando's restaurants to major partner venues like the Roundhouse and, recently, the headquarters of RBS. These open access meetings offer members the opportunity to meet, network and drive forward their activities and campaigns, through idea generation, group discussion and decision-making activities. The current focus is the Wired4Music Manifesto, a campaign initiated and led by the members to spark change-making conversations between young people and major decision-makers. Other consultation and advocacy has included speaking at national conferences and panels such as Music Learning Live and Barbican Expo; consulting with the Mayor of London's team on music strategy; evaluating and secret shopping high profile programmes and concerts; advising the programming team at BBC Three; and running focus groups for Youth Music and Paul Hamlyn Foundation on music education.

#### Professional development

Wired4Music members are offered opportunities to develop their individual skills, knowledge and leadership through placements, paid work opportunities, and access to tailored mentoring, advice and signposting. There are a range of roles and sub-teams within the council including a representative on the organisations' Advisory Group and an observer on the Board of Trustees. Sub-teams work on specific projects or tasks such as website development, event management, leading a choir or film-making. In 2014, we launched the Wired4Music Leadership Programme, a structured seven-step process through which young leaders can develop a business idea or project with one-to-one support and a kick-starter bursary.

#### Youth-led projects & events

As Wired4Music has developed, members of the collective have also initiated their own projects and structures, working together to develop, design and deliver new activity including music-making

projects like the Wired Choir and a band. The programme also has a youth-designed website ([www.wired4music.co.uk](http://www.wired4music.co.uk)), fortnightly newsletters, and a Twitter account. These platforms are steered and updated by young people themselves, alongside staff.

Through these activities, Wired4Music contributes significantly to the **organisational development and governance** of its host organisation, Sound Connections through placements, representation on boards and panels, and links to other areas of work. As youth participation becomes more embedded in Sound Connections, so we have used the learning to advocate more widely for the benefit of youth-led approaches to other cultural education organisations.

## 2.2 The Wired4Music journey: reflections on participation in practice

Wired4Music has evolved over a period of almost five years, during which time we have continuously mapped our progress against Hart's Ladder of Participation –in terms of individual journeys, projects and the programme as a whole.

### Forming and launching (2008-10)

The idea of a young Londoners' music council was developed through a period of research and scoping with Dare London, followed by consultation, recruitment and incubation. During this initial phase activity combined Rung 4 and 5 activities – a mixture of young being assigned and informed about having a say, and the group being consulted about the structure of their council. As the group took shape, the first steps on to Rung 6 were taken, with decisions being shared with young people. The council was rebranded as Wired4Music by its members and launched at City Hall in March 2010.

### Expanding and experimenting (2011)

In the second phase, the group was consolidated and began to expand, through quarterly council meetings and partnership projects. During this time, the programme began operating more consistently between Rungs 5 and 6: members produced the Wired4Music Mission Statement and consulted on the Mayor of London's music education strategy at City Hall – a first taster of higher level advocacy. Over the summer, the group developed their first youth-led event, *Talent=Fame?*, an interactive debate and showcase at Rich Mix which was held at Rich Mix in November 2011. The youth-led event was a first step up to Rung 7 or 8 with young people initiating a large part of the content and leading on its production, supported by the staff team when needed. For the first time, we experienced the multitude of different responses young people may have to being given more autonomy and responsibility. Whilst some of the group emerged as clear leaders and took on decision-making roles, others moved further to the background with one young person leaving the group. Whilst the event was delivered successfully, it became clear that Wired4Music would need more specialist expertise, staff time and resources (especially in production) to make such ideas work better in future. Outcomes are less certain at the top of the ladder.

### Breaking through (2012-13)

As the council's profile grew through 2012, the range of members and partners expanded and we settled into a regular programme of Rung 5-6 activity. Wired4Music members starred in a panel on youth perspectives at the national *musicleaninglive!* 2012 conference, worked with music programme developers at BBC Three on Fazer's Urban Takeover and delivered keynote speeches at Sound Connections' 10th Birthday.

In February 2013, Wired4Music were invited by Roundhouse to co-produce an event exploring the future of music education at Rising Festival 2013, a week-long event platforming new music. Harnessing the expertise of the Roundhouse festival team allowed Wired4Music freedom to concentrate on making

the event as meaningful and youth-focused as possible. It was felt that a standard industry panel format with expert guests speaking from a stage to young people risked falling at the lower rungs of the ladder. Instead Wired4Music redesigned the day to begin with participatory breakout groups, giving all attendees an opportunity to have a say on key issues affecting music education. The panellist – who included Will Kennard of chart-topping dance act Chase & Status and founder of East London Arts & Music, a free school – joined each of the four groups to listen, discuss and debate the issues. This brought young people in direct contact with influential industry figures whilst keeping everyone on a level. This was followed by the panel debate itself. This breakthrough event took the Wired4Music approach to a wider audience and began to raise awareness of using principles of democratic participation.

### Setting the agenda and taking the lead (2013-Present)

Having grown from strength to strength, the council took the decision to produce their first fully fledged campaign that would not just respond to the music agendas, but actively begin to shape and challenge them. The Wired4Music Manifesto was developed over the summer of 2013 and launched that autumn. Working alongside adult staff members, the young leaders initiated, discussed, designed and produced a five-theme campaign aiming to spark conversations between young people and major decision-makers about the future of music in London. This took us up the rungs of the ladder, between Rung 6 and 8 with consultation, shared decision-making and elements of youth-led. Further evaluation and reflection on the manifesto campaign, as it approaches the close of its first phase in March, will provide interesting future research and learning.

In spring 2014, we held a one day symposium at Roundhouse Rising Festival with a specific focus on participation through music. Partner organisations and their young people from across the music sector were invited to explore participation. We ensured a ratio of two young people to each adult. The event comprised key note speeches by Wired4Music members, alongside Sound Connections and Roundhouse staff, followed by break-out sessions co-led by young leaders and staff members, and a panel of young people, chaired by Dr Douglas Lonie of the National Foundation for Youth Music. As expected, we found that many organisations were implementing participatory approaches including young producer schemes (Serious), leadership schemes (Kinetika Bloco) and young trustee roles (Roundhouse). This was a major step towards raising greater awareness of youth participation principles and practice beyond Sound Connections and Wired4Music. This also complimented our consultancy work with a diverse range of organisations including the English Folk Dance & Song Society (EFDSS), Hackney Learning Trust, Roundhouse and Rich Mix.

The work has also been complimented by the Wired4Music Leadership Programme (described above) which has given an opportunity to explore Rung 7 of the ladder – with young people initiating and carrying out their own projects without adult staff initiating activity. The programme has led to the development of several Wired4Music member-led projects including the Wired Choir – a vocal collective bringing together talented vocalists from across London.

## 2.2 Youth participation through music: the benefits for young people

As well as being enshrined in the rights of every young person, taking a participatory approach to youth arts may produce a range of other benefits and positive outcomes for young people. We mapped the benefits reported by Wired4Music members against the Young Foundation's *Framework of outcomes for young people* (McNeil, Reeder and Rich, 2012). The framework draws key outcomes from a diverse and extensive range of research and literature.

## Confidence and agency

As a diverse group working with multiple partner organisations, Wired4Music encourages its members to connect with new people they would not ordinarily meet, boosting confidence. One member comments: *"I have gained confidence in meeting new people. I've learned to be more proactive, and now I'm always seeking new experiences and opportunities."* Another comments: *"If I hadn't been introduced to Wired4Music, I probably wouldn't be doing any of this. I wouldn't have built that confidence."* It has also been observed that young people's confidence travelling across London has increased as their horizons have broadened. A member from Barking & Dagenham states: *"I didn't know about all the great stuff going on in London before I found Wired4Music."*

Wired4Music encourages young people to take a lead on their own projects. Senior member, Delicia describes her own experience: *"After getting involved with Wired, I felt more motivated and confident about my own ventures, I was inspired to organise an event promoting positivity through music."* By empowering young people to take a lead and make decisions, members are also able to pass on their skills to others in a peer mentoring relationship. Wired4Music member Darius from Southwark comments: *"If it weren't for Ackeem, I don't think I'd be doing any of this. He's really shown me a lot, and seeing what he does makes me want to do more."* Senior member Kheron comments: *"I feel so happy that [Wired4Music] offers this kind of support to young people. You have no idea how much your support means to me. With Wired4Music around me – supporting me as a leader – I feel I can really fly. The support you're giving me is going to help even more young people."*

## Communication

Wired4Music encourages young people to speak out, take part in debates and communicate with a wide range of people with whom they would not ordinarily come into contact, for example funders, policy-makers or peers from other parts of London. Members are encouraged to listen to one another, voice their opinions and discuss issues that are important to them. They also communicate with a wide range of audiences through blog posts, social media, presentations and panel discussions. One member states: *"Wired4Music has influenced me to let it out and express myself: what I feel about music, what I do with my music."* Kim Hember of Enfield Music Service commented on the atmosphere in a youth consultation: *"Your team managed to create a really positive, productive working environment that really ensured that all the students felt confident to contribute."*

## Planning, problem solving and creativity

Through Wired4Music, young people have had the opportunity to plan and deliver their own events and projects boosting problem solving skills. One member describes their experience:

*"My most memorable Wired4Music project has been the Wired4Music Choir. It was hard work putting it all together but I gained so many organisational skills, and I've learned how to use social media. This has been a beneficial and relevant experience that I can put on my CV."*

A Wired4Music Assistant described her experience of working behind the scenes in the office:

*“It’s really cool to get behind the scenes and see who in the office makes everything happen... I think that having experience now will really help when I go and look for another job. I now know that if I set my mind to something I can create an amazing outcome.”*

Youth participation can open new doors to creativity. Wired4Music creates a safe space where young people can try out ideas and experiment, without fear of failure. One member states: *“Wired4Music allows me to better myself...You get the chance to explore your ideas. I like opening my horizons and being more open-minded and that’s the reason why, for me, Wired4Music just clicks.”* Another comments: *“I really enjoyed getting involved with something that I thought I would never the chance to try out.”*

### **Resilience, determination and managing feelings**

Increased involvement in collaborative decision-making activities also impacts on young people’s feelings and emotions. We have witnessed many young people overcoming challenging circumstances to participate more fully in shaping their musical experiences. One Wired4Music member reports: *“Wired4Music has taken me on an emotional journey, where I’ve found myself becoming more open minded.”* Another describes their feelings at a session: *“I was nervous but at the end I opened up. I think it was because everyone just made me feel so comfortable, they were so welcoming.”*

Anabelle had come from an economically disadvantaged background states: *“I’m involved with Wired because I want to show that people like me can have a voice... I came from a very poor background.”* She went on to study music at university. She comments: *“I realised as I was writing all of my experiences with Wired4Music down in my personal statement for uni, that I probably wouldn’t be going to uni if it weren’t for Wired.”*

## **2.3 What we have learned**

Over a five year period, Wired4Music has provided the opportunity to innovate, explore and experiment in the field of youth participation through music. This has led to some big successes as well as an array of challenges. Four key learning points are:

### **Youth participation is a process**

Youth voice doesn’t happen overnight: these approaches need time to evolve. The young people themselves are going on a journey and everyone will move at different paces. As Tuckman has shown, groups take time to grow and develop. This can be nurtured by encouraging the group to set their own ground rules, develop a mission statement or devise a pilot event or project to test the water. As the group dynamics settle, strengths will be identified, roles will emerge and leaders will step forward. In time, older members may come to play a key role in recruiting and supporting younger peers.

### **Young people engage at different levels**

As with any activity, don’t expect everyone to be at the same level of engagement. Some young people will want to take a lead, whilst others will prefer to play a background role. It’s important not to force decision-making on people. Similarly, you can expect young people to move up and down the ladder of participation at different rates – this may depend on their interest in a particular activity or issues, their confidence or energy, and their other commitments. A project doesn’t have to reach Rung 8 on Hart’s Ladder to be a successful example of participation. Indeed, pushing too far towards joint decision-

making can leave young people and adults alike overwhelmed. Sometimes you may find that young people take initiative on a lower rung project, for example a young person might unexpectedly take a lead on a consultation project allowing this to evolve into a co-led activity. Over time, groups and activities may become more participatory, whilst individuals may reduce their own level of engagement or move on to new projects. It may help to set your own goals for participation, at an individual, group and organisational level.

### *Be clear about the outcome and manage expectations*

Some young people expressly state that they want a say. When this is not the case, it's important to be clear about why you are consulting young people or inviting them to voice their views. Participants need to feel that they are in a safe space, understand what will be shared and what will remain confidential. It is important for facilitators of youth participation activities to manage expectations: asking what is possible isn't the same as promising the world, and participants need to hear this. Once everyone understands the parameters of the activity, it allows the group to think big without holding unrealistic expectations. Alongside this, it is crucial that projects are safe and accessible to ensure that all those who wish to engage can do so. It helps to establish your potential audience from the outset to ensure diverse needs can be met appropriately.

### *Youth participation is an investment*

Engaging young people meaningfully in shaping their own musical experiences requires dedicated staff and a decent budget. To this extent, it can feel like 'extra' activity but the more integral you make it to the work you do, the more everyone will be rewarded. Clearly designate who will be responsible for any youth voice and leadership programmes, and make this clear to the participants. Allow budget for running meetings and devising activity – making the meetings as social as possible and including food will help to get things moving. It is important to incentivise participants – this might include introducing a reward scheme or bursaries; providing travel costs, food and refreshments; and where appropriate, paying young people especially where you are demanding more commitment or where tasks are less participatory. It also pays to be creative – looking across your organisation, you will find lots of opportunities to try out participatory approaches and get young people involved. This could be anything from setting up a new placement, to asking some participants to re-evaluate a website.

### 3. Summary

Young people have a human right to influence decisions about their musical experiences. Over five years, Wired4Music has made great strides towards giving young people a voice on music-making and music policy in London. From campaigning and consultations, to member-initiated musical ventures, Wired4Music has become a testing ground for experimenting with the principles of youth participation, voice and leadership through music. In the process, we have experienced first-hand, the real power of young people coming together to have a say and take the lead.

As young people participate in more engaged and meaningful ways by sharing in decision-making, so their creativity, communication and confidence have increased. This contributes to their personal development, their socialisation and their awareness of possible journeys through music and life.

This in turn has wider benefits for any organisation which has been set up to support young people. As young people become more empowered and self-motivated, they will also become more independent, allowing more resources to be channelled towards those who have had less opportunity. In time, we have seen a ripple effect as empowered older role models support their younger peers to rise up and find their own voice. We will know that participation is making a large scale impact when changes begin to be made as a direct result of decision-making organisations listening to young people – and acknowledging that they have done so.

We have also learned that youth participation is an involved process which takes time, dedication and resources. Different approaches will work for different people and settings, and it is always important to manage the expectations of any group who are invited to have a say. Often, opportunities to involve young people more in our organisations are everywhere, once we tune into this way of thinking.

Ultimately, if we are providing musical opportunities for young people, it makes sense to invite them to shape them with us. This is the true essence of youth participation. Start to collaborate and experiment, and you will be surprised and amazed at the results.



## Sources

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