Sound Connections youth consultation 2015-2017 findings

Introduction

During 2015-2017 Sound Connections consulted with an estimated 2,200 children and young people age 6-25 across England. We consulted via focus groups and surveys for Arts Council England; youth consultation in partnership with Music Education Hubs in London, Bristol, Brighton and Gloucestershire; focus groups in schools on behalf of the East London Cultural Education Alliance Creative Schools programme; a survey about the EBacc led by Wired4Music, our 1000-strong music network for Londoners age 16-25; and regular conversation with Wired4Music's 40+ core members. Most consultation has been specific to music though some has encompassed the arts more broadly.

This report intends to outline dominant themes that have emerged across Sound Connections' youth consultation over a two-year period 2015-2017, alongside relevant public reports that add or give context to our findings, and set out generalised recommendations. The intention is to amplify the experiences, ideas and opinions of children and young people, and enable those working with children and young people to better understand needs and interests in relation to music and the arts.

The report is presented from the perspective of a young person under the age of 25, having been compiled by Sian Crucefix, Sound Connections student intern (2017).

Consultation findings

Main headlines

Across Sound Connections' youth consultation about music, the requests we hear repeatedly are:

- **Access** to **affordable** and **appropriate spaces**, inside and outside of school**,** to practice and jam, as well as somewhere to record
- **Collaboration** and **networking** opportunities to enable young people to **connect** with other like-minded young people as well as with musical artists and organisations
- **Platforms** to **perform** to **peers** and a desire for more involvement in the creation of events such as open mic evets
  Information, advice and **guidance** as well as **work experience**, to allow young people to grow and develop as artists and progress into careers

Consulting nationally on arts and culture more broadly, the key messages and headlines from young people have been:

- Arts and culture is an outlet for personal expression, a form of escapism, a way to socialise with others and express your individuality. Arts and culture is a tool for relaxing and helping to improve mental health
- Arts and culture is a form of identity and a way to celebrate and learn about cultures different to young people's own
- Film, music and theatre are the favoured art forms
- Great importance is placed on making art at home and young people are committed to creating and sharing their art, particularly through social media and via the internet
- The influence of family and school is key for the first introduction to art and culture, and support from family and friends can affect how young people go on to participate in the arts throughout their lives
- Some arts organisations feel exclusive and unfriendly, and young people are keen to see people like them working there

- The barriers that prevent participation are: time, money, travel, transport and lack of information. Some people are also frustrated by lack of professional development opportunities and weak or non-existent support when leaving education
- Some are unable to take part due to feelings of lack of self-worth and self-confidence. Sometimes friends, families and wider communities can make people feel that arts and culture isn't something acceptable

Participants told us that to get more involved with arts and cultural activities they need:

- More opportunities to take part in areas local to them and that are open to everyone
- Activities within young people's financial means (to make activity more affordable; to enable more activity to take place; cheaper tickets and free activities; to support emerging artists)
- Better communication around opportunities – more information sharing, particularly through social media outlets
- Greater importance placed on the value of arts and culture in society
- The possibility of work in creative industries via professional development opportunities
- More time in the school day, and life generally, to dedicate to arts and culture

More detailed consultation findings can be grouped around 11 recurring themes. These are:

1. Personal and social impact

Across the board, music is highly valued by young people for its capabilities as an outlet for creativity and self-expression, how it contributes to the formation of a social identity and how it can promote and regulate individual well-being. Young people told us about the ways in which music enriches their lives and they recognise the transferable skills it provides. Amongst the skills listed were team work, time management, relaxation and memorisation techniques. Other responses included *"It helps teach discipline and helps people stay engaged"* and *"it encourages empathy"*.[1]

2. Confidence

It is music's ability to inspire confidence that was most referenced in young people's responses. According to one study, 68% of respondents (in this case of a consultation for people age 11-25) have participated in a performance.**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Despite this, a lack of confidence in their abilities was cited as a key preventative factor in their engagement and participation in arts and cultural activities.

3. Mental health

The correlation between music and mental health was emphasised in the consultation findings. It is said that in the UK, 20% of adolescents may experience a mental health problem in any given year.[1] Our findings bring to the fore the sheer number of participants who see music as a prime means of escape; *"it helps me through difficult times"***Error! Bookmark not defined.**, *"It's the only thing that keeps me sane"***Error! Bookmark not defined.** and that music means "#Life"**Error! Bookmark not defined.** are just some of the responses to the question *"Why is music important to you?"*

4. The importance of music

In one consultation, 85% of respondents age 16-19 agreed with the statement "*Music is an important part of my life*" in comparison to 77% of all ages[2]. What was also telling is that in spite of affordability being a common factor in young people's disengagement with arts and cultural activities, one report found that people were *"more willing, in principle at least, to pay for music."*[2] 67% consider music to be *"something worth paying for regularly"*[2]

5. The role of social media and expanding technologies

The emergence of new technologies in recent years is changing how art is created, digested and shared. The accessibility of social media platforms and apps has had a substantial impact on how culture is received by young

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[1] Dicker-Thorne, S. (2015). *Response to the 'Consultation on implementing the English Baccalaureate'*. Sound Connections, p.4.

people. Due to the immediacy of these technologies, a high level of engagement and participation with the arts and culture amongst young people now relies upon the *"authenticity, relevance and shareability"[2]* of content.

94% of smartphone users aged 16-19 access YouTube monthly and almost a third of the platform, (30%), is comprised of music accounts. Consequently, the emphasis has shifted from owning physical copies of media to accessing free online streaming services such as Spotify. With 53% of 16-19 year olds accessing these services per week and young people stating a preference for listening to singles and playlists instead of full albums[2], this trend is likely to undergo significant expansion in correlation with the aging of Generation Z (people born between the mid-1990s to the early 2000s).

Social media was also highlighted by young people as a key way to improve social networking and the dissemination of the arts in their local areas. However, certain platforms and ways of social networking were preferable and it was stated by one participant that *"Most people our age get freaked out if there's a number we don't recognise and we just ignore it. I know a lot of people our age use Tumblr - it's where we've migrated to."* A thorough understanding of how young people interact with different forms of social media and the applicability of a social media platform is crucial to improving youth engagement and participation in the arts.

6. Perceptions of "the arts and culture"

There is notable discrepancy between arts professionals' definition of "*culture*" as relating to specific art forms and young people's definition, whose understanding is much broader and includes activities such as makeup and vlogging.**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

It is crucial to acknowledge this departure from what older generations consider arts and culture and to understand the part that youth culture and behaviours will play in the future development of the arts and creative industries.

7. Music in schools

Across the board, findings suggested that a young person's relationship with the arts begins in the classroom. It was noted that once young people leave education, it is more difficult to find opportunities to participate in arts activities. As such, it is important to understand the role of the school and of the teacher in encouraging and sustaining this relationship.

Responses suggest that it is relatively common for school students to feel that the music curriculum they experience is outdated and irrelevant. Respondents suggest that there is a particular focus on classical music, which many students say they are less interested in and that this bias towards one genre is not representative of young people's diverse interests in a wide range of genres. Young people want a musical education that reflects their personal interests and have suggested that they would benefit from inclusion in discussions about the focus of the curriculum and extra-curricular activities. One young person suggested their engagement would be greatly improved by *"Choosing the theme for events like the summer concert so we feel comfortable and confident…rather than the teacher's picking"*. This was mirrored in another study where it was suggested "*if students could have more of a say in the programming of summer concerts, more students would attend and feel as if they had played a real part in the process."***Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Young people are keen for more time in their school day or lives generally to dedicate to arts and cultural activities.

8. Youth voice

An absence of youth voice from the arts and cultural sector also exists outside of the school environment. It is important to note the strong positive reaction to proposals of opportunities for young people in governance and their involvement in decisions around fundraising and strategic planning. In one study, participants expressed a particular interest in the following areas: Youth Voice, Young Producers and Youth Governance**Error! Bookmark not defined.**, demonstrating a strong desire for self-management and coordination. Sound Connections continues to advocate for

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[2] MIDiA (2017). *Gen Z Meet The Young Millenials. Music. MIDiA.*

better understanding and inclusion of youth voice, and does so through learning from [Wired4Music members](#) and via the [ReWired](#) resources bank. Young people across the country would benefit from accessing programmes and activities based upon the principles of youth voice and co-production.

9. Funding and progression routes

Despite the fact that the creative industries are amongst the largest and fastest growing in the UK, many young people highlighted that there is a lack of advocacy and information sharing about arts and creative careers opportunities, and that this is a reason people don't study the arts at Higher Education level. Consultation responses suggested that the lack of specialist careers guidance and funding for the arts in schools makes it difficult for people to progress into a creative industries career. Those who were not considering studying the arts at a higher level gave the following reasons as to why:

*"I wasn't offered. They cut the funding for it."***Error! Bookmark not defined.**

*"I didn't have the room to add the subjects I enjoy…I will be continuing art as a hobby but not as a career aspect."***Error! Bookmark not defined.**

*"…arts subjects are not as valued at universities…"***Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Young people are keen to question the disparity between the importance of the arts in society and their value within the education system. For many a lack of support transitioning from education into the workforce, limited professional development opportunities and an absence of paid work prevents them from considering the arts and creative industries as a viable sector to work in.

Reinforcement of the place and importance of music and arts in schools is needed to dispel the notion that the creative industries are unable to provide worthwhile careers. Young people require a curriculum that promotes and accommodates their diverse interests and capabilities.

10. Rural isolation

Respondents from rural areas cite a lack of localised provision as a significant preventative factor. They suggest that a lack of transport in these areas results in an overreliance on parents/carers, which in some cases creates a deficit of practical support for young people and therefore prevents engagement with the arts.

11. Fostering community

Consultation findings suggested that young people perceive the arts and creative industries as a key *"vehicle for celebrating other cultures"*.**Error! Bookmark not defined.** There is a real desire on the behalf of young people to engage with arts and culture in order to collaborate with like-minded people and foster community. Young people said that they participate in arts and cultural activities both on their own and with others, and emphasise the importance of collaboration within the field**.** In order to accommodate the recommendations of participants in surveys and focus groups there needs to be greater accessibility to the arts within youth centres and out-of-school clubs and activities; opportunities for schools to work collaboratively; and the creation of online platforms which enable an expansion of arts and culture within young people's local communities.

Conclusions

On the basis of Sound Connections' youth consultation to date, and our understanding of other research findings, we can draw the following conclusions:

- Young people place great importance on arts and culture for individual wellbeing and personal expression
- Young people often lack self-esteem and confidence to participate beyond the 'safety' of school boundaries. Leaving education can also negatively impact young people's engagement and progression and we must consider further how to bridge this gap
- Co-production with young people, so that they are actively involved in informing and shaping arts activities, brings meaning, relevance and long lasting engagement

- Access to and sharing of arts and culture via digital platforms is vitally important to young people
- Young people engage in arts and culture through a variety of ways and value physical spaces to create and socialise. School settings represent cultural hubs for many young people, particularly in rural localities
- Understanding of young people's engagement and access points needs further exploration. We must recognise young people's 'everyday participation' in '*their* arts and culture' through social media, the internet and TV, and re-evaluate what we mean by 'super-served' and 'disengaged'
- Family behaviours and attitudes can both positively and negatively impact young people's engagement with arts and culture. Positive and proactive relationships with parents/carers are vital for young people's long-term participation and engagement in arts and culture
- Young people are prevented from accessing arts and culture by lack of time and money, poor transport, and lack of information. Physical access and lack of funding are also factors. Limited professional development opportunities and lack of support transitioning from education into the workforce are also barriers
- The arts and cultural sector must consider the following factors if we are to improve access to participation for young people:
    - Increased provision – through multiple facets
    - Improved communications – particularly through relevant social media
    - Funding and professional development opportunities
    - Wider advocacy for the value of arts and culture
    - Wider advocacy for the value and opportunities within the creative industries
    - Provision of space and opportunities for young people to take the lead with creating and sharing their own work