

Youth, Arts, and Creative Education: What's Changing in 2026?

What is the Labour Government doing in support of young people, the arts, and our creative economy? 2025 provided some answers, as several policy-defining strategies and reviews were published. This round-up provides the headlines, opportunities, and challenges for our work.

2025 was a year of landmark intent. What does it mean for 2026?

“We’ve moved from ‘arts and young people on the sidelines’ to ‘arts and young people as priorities’” says Interim Co-CEO Carol Reid.

The Wins:

- New funding for youth spaces, a commitment to youth voice and wellbeing, better geographical equity, and school curriculum reform that finally takes music seriously.

The Gaps:

- A lack of specific support for small and diverse-led organisations, slow response to digital change, and missing detail over long-term investment in mental health.

The Verdict:

- Intent alone is not enough. Success will depend on all Government Departments being joined-up to deliver on their promises.

What was published?

- [**Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy**](#) is the first national youth strategy in over 2 decades, and was co-created with youth and expert advisory groups. Published alongside a [state of the nation report](#), the vision is for a future where all young people, no matter their background, have the skills, opportunities, and connections to thrive and are empowered to shape their own lives and the community around them.
- [**The Curriculum and Assessment Review final report**](#) was published in November, analysing the national curriculum (and its associated testing measures) in primary school, secondary, and 16 – 19 education. The first review in over a decade, the brief was to make recommendations to ensure the curriculum is cutting edge and fit for purpose for a rapidly changing world. The [Government response](#) gives some specifics of how the

recommendations will be taken forward.

- **Arts Council England – an Independent Review** set out to assess Arts Council England's role, structure and effectiveness (in case you didn't know, Arts Council England is Youth Music's main funder, contributing £9,651,000 of National Lottery funding annually). Undertaken by Baroness Hodge (so referred to as the 'Hodge review'). The Government 'strongly welcomes' the findings. Responses from them, and Arts Council England, are forthcoming.
- **The 10 year Creative Industries Sector Plan** was published by Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in June 2025 as part of the Government's industrial strategy. It aims to ensure the UK is recognised as the best place in the world to make and invest in film and TV, music, performing and visual arts, video games, advertising and beyond, and increase annual investment in the Creative Industries to £31 billion by 2035. It touches on creative education, careers advice and routes into the industries.

What were the headlines?

The reports collectively span hundreds of pages, and thousands of words – too many for us to summarise here. So, we focus our analysis on the things that matter most to Youth Music, young people and our partners.

The importance of music and the arts is reaffirmed

All publications emphasise the importance of arts and music, with recognition that arts education and entitlement for young people needs improvement. Particularly in schools. The Government plans to "revitalise arts education" through a reformed national curriculum and more support for teachers. The school performance measures that resulted in the decline of music and other arts subjects will be reformed. They'll be a new 'enrichment offer' that improves access to enrichment activities (including arts and culture) beyond the statutory curriculum, working with local clubs, voluntary sector organisations or national partners.

Hodge is unequivocal about the importance of the arts, and says that a "national Arts Council, free from political interference, is the best way to ensure that these benefits are realised across the country and by all the communities within it".

The youth strategy brings a welcome focus on "enrichment opportunities in the culture, sport, and wider youth sectors", alongside named investment. But sport gets 59 mentions, to just 12 of 'the arts'.

So what about our national music strategy, the National Plan for Music Education? This was received positively when published in 2022 under the old Government. But talk of national music education policy is now wrapped up in the forthcoming National Centre for Arts and Music Education, which will help to deliver on some of the aims outlined above.

Commitments to Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Access (IDEA)

It's a mixed bag when it comes to IDEA. Strong on commitment, less so on specifics, and little evidence that an intersectional lens has been considered. That said, there are some tangible changes afoot:

- When it comes to access, the youth strategy promises to task “Arts Council England, with reducing the gap in access to opportunities and focus on giving thousands of young people in-person connections … and creative activities near them”.
- The curriculum and assessment review called for “stronger representation of the diversity that makes up our modern society, allowing more children to see themselves in the curriculum”. In addition, there’ll be additional guidance for providers in specialist settings to adapt the curriculum to meet specific needs.
- Hodge says that “ACE should ensure that under-represented groups are represented across the organisation at all levels”, and that “work to support and promote diverse groups both within the organisation and in the funded organisations should always be a priority”.

AND

Geographical equity is clearly a priority across all the strategies.

- Hodge says that Arts Council should launch a new programme to grow culture in under-served areas, and suggests a number of tax breaks designed to benefit organisations outside of London and the South East.
- The Youth Strategy promises a new Richer Young Lives Fund, targeted at ‘underserved areas’, for grassroots organisations to deliver high-quality youth work and activities.
- ‘Creative clusters’ are a key pillar of the Creative Industries Sector Plan, where sectors and creative disciplines combine in specific geographical areas, and local leaders and devolved governments drive growth.

BUT...

Other than the mention of grassroots organisations in the youth strategy, there’s a lack of equity recommendations to specifically support small and diverse-led organisations. For example, Hodge’s creative tax breaks are unlikely to benefit organisations that don’t produce shows, or have access to rich donors.

Hodge also recommends that Arts Council’s 10 year strategy, [Let’s Create](#), is replaced. This is despite the fact that it “has undoubtedly impacted positively on diversity both in who is working in the Arts, and who is enjoying arts and cultural experiences”. This [prompted Youth Music’s Interim Co-CEO Carol Reid to share their concerns](#).

Youth voice and co-creation

The youth strategy is strong on youth voice, and young people’s views are referenced in the curriculum review. But there’s little mention in the other publications.

Youth Matters makes clear that involving young people in decisions that affect them “is not just fair, it makes those decisions better”. It also highlights plans to “lower the voting age to 16 for all elections ahead of the next UK Parliamentary General Election, increasing young people’s engagement in our democracy”.

It outlines a commitment from central government to better integrate youth voice across its work via a new Youth Policy Network in the DCMS, made up of specialist organisations. It will also make it a requirement of DCMS youth funding for programmes “to be co-designed with young people unless there is a good reason why not”. This means local areas in receipt

of youth funding will need to demonstrate that young people have driven the decisions that are made about them. But will this commitment extend across all Whitehall departments? There's an opportunity for the Government to demonstrate this by embedding youth voice as it refreshes the national curriculum.

From national to local funding decisions

In addition, youth councils will be established across England to influence local decision-making. Alongside a 'test and learn' project to understand the best ways young people can influence funding decisions at a local level.

This focus on more localised decision-making is also a core feature of the Hodge Review. She states that for non-national projects and organisations, "monies should be devolved to new local and regional decision-making boards. These will comprise local artists, representatives of local community organisations, local education representatives and representatives from local government". Controversially, she positions that many have said they'd 'give their time freely' for this duty.

Creative careers and progression in music

The Curriculum Review notes that "GCSE Music becomes inaccessible to most students unless they have external or extra-curricular tuition". In response, they make recommendations for a "better sequenced and more equitable curriculum" by refining what is taught from primary school and beyond.

GCSE doesn't cover the more vocational aspects of music, and doesn't teach you about creative careers. A new, more vocational qualification pathway is recommended, called [V Levels](#), designed for those who want a broader course that will support them to progress into employment. These will sit alongside existing A Levels and [T Levels](#).

How do young people get informed about creative careers? A refreshed, UK-wide £9 million creative careers service was promised in the Creative Industries Sector Plan, and is due to launch late 2026.

The plan also says that apprenticeships are being reformed to better suit the needs of the creative industries. For example, through [flexi-job apprenticeship agencies](#) (where apprenticeships can be based across different host organisations) and plans for shorter duration apprenticeships.

Hodge recommends a strengthened focus on 'talent development' from Arts Council's regularly funded organisations, alongside a new 'National Programme for Individuals' that would give emerging and mid-career individuals from low income backgrounds, under-represented groups and under-served areas access to £30,000 per year and mentoring support. But it's suggested that this exciting proposal is initially funded from the same pot as Developing Your Creative Practice. Unless additional funding is found, it would mean fewer opportunities overall. And would the higher funding threshold be a barrier for young and less experienced artists?

We know that creative careers go way beyond that of 'artist' or 'musician'. Many Youth Music projects are staffed by young adults who've progressed from being participants. So it's good news that The National Youth Strategy promised to "invest £15 million over the next 3 years in youth workers, volunteers, and other trusted adults to up-skill the existing youth sector workforce and increase the number of trusted adults providing safe support to

young people”.

In addition, there is a “Youth Guarantee” that supports young people’s post-school progression to employment. This includes:

- Better transition support and an ‘enrolment by default’ backstop so that no young person is left without a place in post-16 education or training.
- More opportunities to earn and learn through additional work experience placements and extra Sector-based Work Academy Programme places.
- Expansion of employment Youth Hubs that bring together Jobcentre services and local partners, such as health, housing, and wellbeing.
- Guaranteed paid work and wraparound support for over 55,000 young people aged 18 to 21 who have been on Universal Credit for 18 months.

Funding

The Youth Matters Strategy promises a suite of spending (although it’s not always clear what’s new, or what’s simply been re-packaged). The concrete commitments include:

- £350 million over the next 4 years to refurbish or build up to 250 youth facilities through the Better Youth Spaces programme.
- £60 million over the next 3 years through a new Richer Young Lives Fund to allow grassroots organisations to deliver high-quality youth work and activities.
- Spend £22.5 million over 3 years to enable up to 400 schools to deliver the enrichment activities mentioned above.
- A £132.5 million programme, ‘Every Child Can’, to support the provision of services, facilities or opportunities from funding via the National Lottery Community Fund.

The big music money in the Creative Sector Plan is a new 3 year £30 million “Music Growth package ... to help more UK emerging artists break through on a domestic and international stage” ([currently in development with an appointed expert advisory group](#)).

The arts funding crisis is recognised by Hodge, who proposes a suite of pragmatic recommendations to support the sector, including various tax breaks. She recommends a new £250 million endowment for the arts.

In addition, she is clear that Arts Council should provide longer-term funding with less bureaucracy in its application and reporting structures. She also recommends “All DCMS lottery funded bodies should consider working together to simplify and perhaps share their application processes and to agree, as far as possible, a common set of KPIs”. Youth Music is a delegated distributor of National Lottery funding, so it’s likely that this recommendation will apply to us.

Outside of the Hodge Review, the Government has recently announced a [£1.5 billion ‘Arts Everywhere’ package](#), which is new and additional funding for the sector. It means a welcome 5% increase for Youth Music in 2026/27.

Both the Hodge Review and Youth Matters Strategy show that the Government is

increasingly looking beyond traditional funding models to bring in additional investment, for example by working with philanthropists, social impact investors, and businesses.

Mental health and wellbeing

The Youth Matters Strategy is strong on supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing, but there's a missed opportunity to provide more coherence to this pressing issue across the other reports.

We are disappointed that the Curriculum and Assessment Review maintains the current school testing regime. In our evidence submission to the review, we called for an ending of the 'learn to test' culture due to its negative impact on children's mental health. The Youth Matters strategy promises a range of interventions to support inclusion in school, but their impact will only ever be limited without a more inclusive school assessment system.

The Youth Matters Strategy also promises to "reform the delivery of mental health support to reduce waits and intervene much earlier". They will:

- Pilot improvements to training for staff to help young people with more complex needs, including experience of trauma, neurodivergence, and eating or body image challenges.
- Ensure young people have access to early wellbeing advice and can be signposted to mental health support in the Young Futures Hubs without needing a referral or to meet a clinical threshold.
- Take steps to reduce unacceptably long waiting times for community mental health services by improving productivity and by reducing local inequalities and differences in access.

The plans are hugely welcome. But there is little on the 'how', and no mention of specific or additional funding in this section of the report.

We are also disappointed that none of the publications make any reference to the incidence of neurodivergence amongst young people, or plans to tackle the wait times for ADHD or autism assessments (consultation on 'SEND reforms' will take place in 2026, the scope of which is currently unclear). Through our work, we see that neurodivergence is often co-located with poor mental health, and this is exacerbated by a lack of formal diagnosis.

Tech and AI

As is often the case when it comes to digital technology, we can't help feeling that plans are several steps behind where they should be.

The Curriculum Review will ensure that there is greater embedding of digital literacy across the curriculum. But for more concrete plans to improve the AI and digital skills talent pipeline, or the impact of AI on future jobs, we'll need to wait for the recommendations from a new "Digital, AI and Technology Task and Finish Group" who are due to report to Government by the end of the academic year. Hodge makes no recommendations about AI or digital matters.

The Creative Industries Plan, as we might expect, goes some way to tackle and embrace tech developments, alongside skills needs. But changes to prepare children for 'jobs of the future' will be the job of the Digital and AI group referenced above, and work is promised to

research skills needs “to ensure the skills system is flexible enough to respond to changes in job roles driven by technological change”. This feels too little, too late when AI is hurtling towards us at such rapid pace.

Climate justice

Climate education gets its own section in the Curriculum Review, with recommendations to bolster its presence in science and geography. As we might expect, the review evidences that “Young people have been clear about their desire for a greater focus on this area in their education. As well as being a common theme in our engagement with young people, polling emphasises their level of concern and significant appetite for further information on climate change and climate science, including their desire to support solutions”.

A group of youth sustainability champions are working with Government on a sustainability and climate change strategy; and the Creative Industries Plan is clear that the sector will continue to play a key role in the net zero transition.

Hodge doesn’t cover matters of environmental sustainability or net zero. But with ‘environmental responsibility’ a core investment principle in Arts Council’s Let’s Create strategy, we hope any strategy revision retains this area of focus, given its importance to young people.

What next?

The Youth Strategy declares, “for too long the challenges facing this generation have gone unheard and unaddressed”. Has anything actually changed? Whilst there are positive signs on the horizon, they’ll take time to be implemented. To succeed, they’ll also require different departments of Government to work together. We believe that the Youth Strategy offers genuine hope for change, in a future that centralised young people’s voices, views and concerns. But it also requires wholesale change, and new ways of working from Government. We hope that their follow through is as strong as their commitments.



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