

Youth Music's Response To The PEC Creative Industries Skills Audit For Music and Milburn Interim Report

Youth Music is the UK's leading charity for children and young people's music-making; Industry Connect is our cross-sector research and coalition programme, drawing on consultation with hundreds of young people, practitioners, educators and employers (2024–2026) to understand how young people actually move into and through creative work.

Youth Music welcomes the [Creative Industries Skills Audits](#) (2026) - particularly the Audit for Music [‘the Audit’] - as an important evidence base, and we recognise much of what it surfaces from our own Industry Connect research. We also welcome the interim findings of [Young People and Work](#) (2026), the independent review led by Alan Milburn for the DWP [‘the Review’] into the rising number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

We consider these reports together by design: the Audit views the challenge from the employer's side, the Review from the young person's side. We see them as two ends of the same broken connection, which is why our response argues for investing in the whole ecosystem rather than any single fix. Through Industry Connect, Youth Music is doing exactly this: convening employers, educators, youth workers, freelancers and young people, building the cross-sector relationships the system lacks, and testing ways of reconnecting the two ends, so the experience employers need and the support young people need are developed together.

What these reports confirm

Both reports support several findings from our original Industry Connect report (2024):

Skills shortages and the importance of transversal or ‘life skills’. The Audit highlights difficulties recruiting to technical, production and backstage roles in live music and to education roles, and identifies the importance of transversal skills such as “planning and organising, working with others and communication” - what our interviewees called “life skills.” The Review echoes this, finding employers seeking work-ready candidates but young people too often poorly prepared, with gaps in digital, workplace and ‘soft’ skills.

Structural barriers continue to exacerbate equity and class disparities.

- The Audit confirms **pronounced class-based disparities** in the music workforce, alongside the **under-representation of people of colour and women**, especially in senior roles. This is not new, but it remains central to our mission: equity, safety and rights are not separate from workforce development - they are fundamental to it. Our Just the Way It Is? report (2025) sharpens the picture, finding 94% of Black, Black British, Caribbean or African musicians having experienced discrimination.
- The Audit reports employers struggling to recruit because **candidates are unable or unwilling to**

travel to remote locations, or because of poor transport links. This mirrors our research: many young people, especially outside London, struggle to access training, interviews or work experience in the first place - and even where they succeed at interview, only a few can afford to move to London or out of the family home.

- The Audit's finding that **"who you know" networks** are used more in music recruitment than online or professional platforms is concerning. Reliance on, and continual promotion of, these networks further limits opportunities for underrepresented people to enter the workforce.
- The Review adds a dimension the Audit does not: **mental health as a structural barrier to participation**, finding that "one in five of all NEET young people report a mental health condition, more than double the share in 2012." For a sector that already struggles to retain and progress people from marginalised backgrounds, this matters. Across both reports and our own research, employers express a need for more support to hire and retain young workers generally, not just those facing additional barriers.

Skills investment must broaden beyond entry level to mid-career. The Audit confirms shortages are most acute among experienced staff, not just new entrants - echoed by other research, including UK Theatre (2025) - yet investment and policy attention remain concentrated at entry level. Workforce development must address the full arc of a career, including the people who support young people: practitioners, mentors, youth workers, educators, managers and role models, not teachers alone.

The following response, though, centres young people specifically (those under 30), and leans into how skills shortages and a lack of participation can be, and already are being., addressed.

Industry Connect:

Supporting young people through these challenges is precisely what the youth music sector already does: our spaces keep young people safe, well and connected - building confidence, skills, ambition and readiness for work - while providing the real-world experience that helps them move into it. Through Industry Connect, Youth Music works the other side of that connection too: bringing employers together with educators, youth workers and young people, lobbying for the changes the sector needs, and supporting good practice. This means more organisations can recruit, support and retain young people well, and the entry routes too often gatekept by current networks are opened up.

Seen from the ground up, our work speaks to the same challenges both reports identify and points beyond them:

- **There's an experience shortage, not just a skills shortage.** The Audit finds the two most common reasons vacancies are hard to fill are a lack of required skills and of work experience - the same gap the Review describes from the other direction. Industry Connect starts from a different point: rather than mapping employer demand, our research explored what the system around young people actually looks like, and what it must become to serve both them and industry.
- **The support system needs to reflect the winding, stop-start reality of pathways.** The skills and experience employers want are rarely built through a single, direct route: young people move through overlapping, often sideways routes across education, youth work, grassroots provision, work experience, community spaces and industry itself.

- **Training and experience access must be equalised, and begin far earlier than 18+.** The difficulties employers report in recruiting skilled, experienced entrants begin well before the application stage. The learning, confidence and experience people need are shaped much earlier than post-18 education. The Review highlights that low access to work experience compounds the problem: many NEET young people have never worked, missing chances to build critical workplace skill. But then for all young people, finding a Saturday job is increasingly hard.

Access to creative education and workplace exposure remains uneven, and ideas about who can or should pursue a creative career are shaped by the same systems of privilege that determine who can afford to volunteer, take a degree, do an internship or start a business. The action required is to widen access much earlier, to the trusted relationships and supported experiences that help young people build real capability.

- **Retention is a workforce priority, not just recruitment.** Getting young people into work is not enough if the sector cannot keep them. This is the participation gap the Review diagnoses nationally, seen here inside music; a system that draws young people in but is not built to carry them through. We see it as a two-sided mismatch: employers need support to receive young people well, while young people (often with no prior experience) need support to find their footing, in a sector that too often retains privilege, poor behaviour, unfair competition and unsafe practice. Unwelcoming workplaces, combined with the gaps young people arrive with from an education system that no longer prepares them fully, drive higher turnover among new entrants. And in music – 31% of young people are already considering leaving (Just the Way It Is? 2025). There is also a large, highly trained population of musicians and performers that traditional routes alone cannot place. The answer is not fewer of them, but better routes. Supporting young people to move sideways across the creative ecosystem and to build enterprises of their own, rather than competing for a narrow set of established jobs.

What is still missing

Youth work, non-formal education and grassroots provision deserve greater recognition and respect. They need a seat at the table. The Audit focuses on employers, but education and youth work roles do appear among those expected to grow in importance, albeit low in the rankings. We would caution against reading this as low priority: it may instead reflect a misreading of where the real skills-building work happens, especially among those underserved by mainstream education. The Audit’s DCMS definition captures only part of the sector, and it is unclear how fully it captures non-teacher youth music practitioners and grassroots providers. This matters because so much of how we develop young talent happens outside formal education, through trusted relationships, local provision and community practice. We can already see a future where on-the-job and non-formal training increasingly replace, or prove more valuable than, formal external structures.

This is given further weight by the Review, which found England’s narrow, exam-focused curriculum contributes to disengaging young people and prevents them building the collaboration, communication and problem-solving skills employers say they need. Milburn concludes the system “does not fail by accident, but by design...[it] is designed to produce qualifications rather than working adults.” Youth Music’s programmes exist precisely because the formal system does not reach, or actively excludes, many of the young people with the most to offer industry. This is why the youth music sector — which succeeds where the “pipeline” does not — must be brought into this conversation from the start, not as an afterthought. That also means rethinking what we mean

by both “industry” and “education,” and recognising how much they already overlap.

Without a National Music Strategy, fragmented provision is all we have. We reiterate the case for a National Music Strategy. This is something our Industry Connect research called for explicitly, and which still does not exist in any formal sense. Without a joined-up national approach spanning industry, education, youth work, grassroots organisations and government, the sector will keep relying on the rhetoric of pipelines that do not match lived realities, and on well-intentioned initiatives that cannot add up to systemic change. The Review diagnosed the same failure nationally. With its final recommendations due in autumn 2026, there is a real opportunity for music and the wider creative industries to secure explicit representation in whatever cross-government architecture emerges, without which we risk falling through the gaps of a system not designed with our industry in mind.

Milburn’s diagnosis is that Britain “has institutions for young people, but...does not have a participation system.” The youth music sector already works as a version of that missing system at sector level, and Industry Connect is how we are working to evidence and support that nationally.

What needs to happen

Better collaboration between all parties, and serious improvement to existing routes in. We welcome the Audit’s call for collaboration between industry and education e.g. widening apprenticeships and placements, improving careers information, and funding modular training through the Growth & Skills Levy and Lifelong Learning Entitlement. But these routes need real work at the front end to function equitably. The Review highlights that apprenticeship starts for 16–24 year olds have fallen by more than a third since the Levy was introduced in 2017. If new pathways keep depending on privilege, hidden entry requirements, unpaid access or urban proximity, they will reproduce the same exclusions under another name. As part of a joined-up, sector-wide commitment, we see an opportunity to:

- Advocate for a more expansive use of the Levy, to support internships for younger and underrepresented entrants;
- Agree clear standards for recruiting, appointing and financially supporting interns;
- Ensure a ‘Pact for Skills’ - as the Audit recommends - includes the youth, community and grassroots sector as signatories and advisors, not just industry and formal education.

Under-resourced charities cannot remain the default funders of creative industry training.

Industry and government must share the cost. The Audit finds the most common barrier to training among music employers is a lack of funds, at 51% - well above the 36% across the creative industries - and many freelancers and early-career workers cannot afford to train at all. Youth Music’s funding model already meets part of this gap, offering agency, micro-finance, support and real experience through non-formal, work-embedded routes, but it is hard to sustain without longer-term investment. This is also a question of where the money sits: the Review estimates the cost of youth NEET at £125 billion a year, yet only £1 in every £25 of welfare spend on this group goes on employment support, while youth music organisations acts, in effect, as a preventative service that reduces downstream costs to health, justice and welfare. We are calling for a review of how young people access funds for short-term training and work-based learning; for employers to widen access to opportunities, internships and recruitment events beyond London and those with

financial backing; and for investment in the sector to be drawn from education, health and youth budgets, not arts grants alone.

Respect and resource the educators and leaders already doing the work. The Audit points to the need for transversal skills and greater investment in middle and senior management, so leadership development must be part of the answer. Drawing on UNESCO's framing of teachers as change agents, we extend this to youth workers, mentors and creative practitioners: no creative sector is better than its leaders, and to strengthen the emerging workforce we must first invest in the empathetic, ethical and inclusive leadership of its current one. We recognise the rationale for redirecting apprenticeship funding towards younger entrants, but the recent withdrawal of Levy funding from leadership and management apprenticeships (the Level 3 Team Leader, Level 5 Operations Manager and Level 6 Chartered Manager standards) risks hollowing out exactly the management development the Audit identifies as a priority. We are calling for that withdrawal to be reviewed, and (while welcoming the parallel move to fully fund under-25 apprenticeships at SMEs) for support that also reaches the largely freelance creative workforce it does not yet touch.

The majority of the music workforce is self-employed, but our system hasn't caught up. The Audit notes that 62% of the music workforce is self-employed, yet workforce development remains largely geared towards employed roles. We agree practitioners need training in tax, business management and self-employment skills, as is rightly embedded in much music provision/Higher Education. But we warn against letting the DIY narrative become the only one driving early-career support. We are calling for investment not just in individual self-employment skills but in the mechanisms that support new business development, shared infrastructure and joint practice - new models for *collaborative, collective and collegiate working*.

What Industry Connect is already doing

Both reports describe a system failing to carry young people into work, but neither names who is already doing this successfully, where the formal system does not reach. This is the gap Youth Music and Industry Connect work to fill: building a more inclusive, connected ecosystem that centres young people and their futures, alongside the employers who need them. It acts as a bridge between practice, policy and industry, and points to what wider recognition of the sector could unlock at scale. Our focus is on:

- 1. Reframing the journey: progression is non-linear, and the 'pipeline' is a misnomer.** Where the Audit reads the problem as a skills shortage, and the Review as a missing "participation system," we would add a third reading: it is less about skill than about access and exposure. The skills gap is, in many cases, an experience gap. Young people are not under-skilled, but under-recognised and under-exposed to the opportunities that would let them prove it. Through Industry Connect we have deliberately moved away from a narrow, "music careers" ladder, towards a model that frames progression as horizontal, non-linear movement through a wider landscape, with participation that includes being trained in situ, not just prepared beforehand. We are calling on industry, funders and government to stop designing routes around a 'talent pipeline' that serves only a few, and to recognise and resource the non-formal settings where capability is actually built.
- 2. Reframing the system: industry and education are interdependent, not separate.** The Audit comes at this from the employer's side, by design, while the Review names fragmentation across the system as the core failure. We welcome that diagnosis and take it further in practice: education and industry are interdependent parts of one ecosystem - alongside the social, civic, health and youth sectors - and young

people's futures depend on the connections between them. Industry Connect build those connections, convening partners who rarely sit at the same table. We are calling for workforce and skills policy to be designed across sectors rather than within any one of them, with the youth and community sector treated as a core partner, not a downstream delivery arm.

- 3. Embedding safer, fairer, youth-led practice.** Both reports focus on getting young people into work; less explicit is whether the workplaces they enter are ready to keep them - the retention gap our own research surfaces. We are not only convening the sector but changing how it works: through Industry Connect we are embedding safer, fairer and youth-led practice across our coalition partners and the wider systems of music. We are calling on employers and funders to treat safe, inclusive and youth-led workplace practice as part of workforce development, not separate from it, and to resource the support that helps organisations receive and retain young people well.
- 4. Pushing for system-level change: recognition, a national strategy, and the evidence to back it.** With the Review's recommendations due in autumn 2026, there is a clear opportunity to answer the question neither yet does; who will deliver change, and how it will be funded. The answer is already visible, if under-recognised: the youth music sector, among others too often dismissed as 'informal', is critical infrastructure for skills, work, wellbeing and community. Through Industry Connect, Youth Music is generating the cross-sector research and young people's testimony that makes this case at the level where it counts. We are calling for that role to be formally recognised, for the long-term, stable funding it demands, and for a national music strategy spanning the full breadth of music learning and work. This is how reframing becomes reform.

Our position

Skills, access and equity: a whole-ecosystem approach to music, work and young people's futures.

If the music and creative industries want a more skilled, diverse and sustainable workforce, they need to invest in the whole system that develops people, not just the end points of recruitment and formal training. The Creative Industries Skills Audits and the Milburn Review give the sector an important and welcome evidence base. Industry Connect shows what the response should look like: a more connected, equitable, intergenerational and collaborative model of workforce development.

Youth Music | Industry Connect | June 2026



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