

# Quick Read: Youth Music's Response To The PEC Skills Audit and Milburn Interim Report

## What Are The Two Reports?

### The PEC Creative Industries Skills Audit for Music (May 2026)

Published by the Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) and Work Advance, this is the first major, government-funded study of skills across all creative industries, including a dedicated deep-dive on music. It surveyed over 1,300 employers and asked: what skills do you need, what's missing, and what's getting in the way? [Although the researchers acknowledge that the findings are only indicative, since they're based on small sample of only 70 music employers.]

#### What it found:

- Nearly half of creative employers want to grow - but are being held back by an outdated skills system
- 43% of creative employers report skills shortages or gaps
- 51% of music employers say they can't afford training - much higher than the 36% average across creative industries
- Skills gaps are worst in the middle of careers, not just at the entry level
- Employers want people with "transversal skills" - things like planning, communication, working with others
- Music relies on "who you know" networks more than any other recruitment method - which shuts out people without the right connections
- Class-based disparities and under-representation of people of colour and women (especially in senior roles) are clearly confirmed

#### What it recommends:

- Government, industry and educators should agree a new "Pact for Skills"
- Widen the talent pool - recruit more young people and those underrepresented in the workforce
- Support freelancers better - 62% of the music workforce is self-employed

## The Milburn Review: Young People and Work — Interim Report (May 2026)

An independent review commissioned by the DWP and led by former Health Secretary Alan Milburn. It looks at the crisis of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and asks why it's happening and what needs to change. We have used the acronym NEET only to remain faithful to the report. Young people are increasingly distancing themselves from this term as reductive and stigmatising.

## What the study found:

- Nearly one million young people in the UK are currently NEET
- One in eight 16-24 year olds is now not in work, education or training
- Most affected young people are not even looking for work - many have never had a job
- One in five NEET young people has a mental health condition - more than double the rate in 2012
- England's narrow, exam-focused school curriculum is actively disengaging young people and stopping them building the skills employers need
- Apprenticeship starts for 16–24 year-olds have fallen by more than a third since the Levy was introduced in 2017
- The cost to the economy is estimated at £125 billion a year

In Milburn's own words, the system "does not fail by accident, but by design... it is designed to produce qualifications rather than working adults." And: Britain "has institutions for young people, but... does not have a participation system."

The full recommendations are expected in autumn 2026.

## What Youth Music and Industry Connect Say

**Two reports. One broken connection. Employers on one end, young people on the other, and not enough in between.**

Both reports are looking at the same broken connection, just from different ends. The PEC Audit sees it from employers' side; Milburn sees it from young people's side. Through the hundreds of conversations Youth Music has had with young people, practitioners, educators and employers, Industry Connect sits right in the middle.

Here's what we think these reports get right, and what's still missing.

## What Both Reports Get Right

- **There's a skills shortage but also an experience shortage.**  
The Audit says the two main reasons vacancies are hard to fill are a lack of skills and a lack of work experience. Milburn finds many NEET young people have never worked at all. We'd argue the real problem isn't that young people lack ability, it's that they lack access and exposure to prove what they can do.
- **Structural barriers are real and serious**  
Both reports confirm that class, geography, and background determine who gets in. Many young people - especially outside London - simply can't afford to volunteer, intern, relocate, or take an unpaid opportunity. "Who you know" remains the main way music jobs are filled. This is not a pipeline problem. It's a fairness problem.
- **The system isn't working for the middle of careers either**  
Investment and policy attention are concentrated at entry level, but shortages are acute among experienced staff. The people who support young people - practitioners, mentors, youth workers, community music leaders - need investment too, not just new entrants.

- **Mental health is a workforce issue, not a personal one**  
That one in five NEET young people has a mental health condition matters for music. A sector struggling to retain people from underrepresented backgrounds cannot ignore this.

## What's Still Missing

- **Youth work, non-formal education and grassroots provision are undervalued**  
That one in five NEET young people has a mental health condition matters for music. A sector struggling to retain people from underrepresented backgrounds cannot ignore this.
- **There is no National Music Strategy.**  
Without a joined-up national approach spanning industry, education, youth work and government, we will keep relying on well-intentioned initiatives that can't add up to real change. Industry Connect has called for this explicitly. It still doesn't exist.
- **Retention matters as much as recruitment.**  
Getting young people into work is not enough if the sector cannot keep them. In music, 31% of young people are already considering leaving. Workplaces need to be ready to receive young people well. That means safe, fair, inclusive practice as a core part of workforce development, not an optional extra.

## What We're Calling For

- **Formally recognise the youth music sector as critical infrastructure for skills, work and wellbeing** with the long-term, stable funding that demands.
- **Invest in the whole ecosystem** not just recruitment or formal training. Skills, access and equity have to be addressed together.
- **Share the cost of training across industry, government and health/youth budgets** not arts grants alone. Under-resourced charities cannot keep being default funders of creative industry training.
- **Open routes in.** Jobs, internships and work must be accessible to people without money, connections or in London. Advocate for a more expansive use of the Growth & Skills Levy.
- **Set clear, fair standards** for how young people are recruited, paid and supported in internships and placements.
- **Make sure a "Pact for Skills" includes grassroots and community organisations** as partners not just industry and universities.
- **Review the withdrawal of Levy funding** from leadership and management apprenticeships, which risks gutting the mid-level development the Audit identifies as critical.

## What Industry Connect Is Already Doing

Industry Connect is Youth Music's cross-sector research and coalition programme. It brings employers, educators, youth workers, freelancers and young people together. Building the connections the system lacks and testing what a better version looks like in practice.

**Reframing progression as non-linear** moving away from the idea that there's one fixed ladder into the industry that only a few can climb, towards a wider landscape where young people can move sideways, build enterprises, and prove themselves through real experience.

**Bridging industry and education** together. Treating them as interdependent, not separate.

**Embedding safer, fairer, youth-led practice across coalition partners.** Because getting young people into work and keeping them there requires workplaces that are ready to receive them.

**Building the evidence base.** Generating research and young people's testimony to make the case for formal recognition, a national strategy, and the funding that goes with it.

**Both reports describe a system that is failing young people.**

**Industry Connect is already building the alternative.**



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