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# UK Arts, culture and young people

Innovative practice  
and trends

Summary report

November 2024

By tialt -  
there is an alternative

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# Introduction

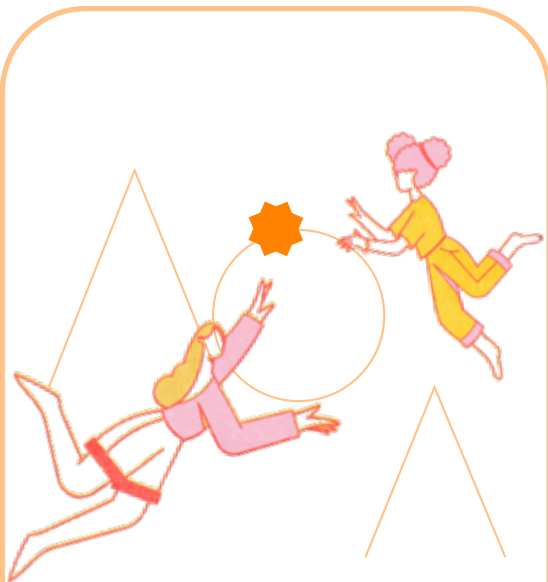
This research provides a review of arts and cultural provision for young people (aged 11-24) across the four nations of the UK.

It intends to provide an up-to-date, although not exhaustive, account of the key issues that young people taking part in arts and cultural activities are facing, and how creative practice is responding to these needs.

It is intended to be useful for arts and cultural organisations, practitioners, funders, and policymakers to better understand current practice and provision for different groups of young people in diverse geographical areas.

It is based on a rapid literature review, interviews with the arts councils of the four nations of the UK and leading funders of art and culture for young people, a sector survey, nine case study visits, and an online workshop with a further eight organisations.

**“This research provides a review of arts and cultural provision for young people (aged 11-24) across the four nations of the UK.”**



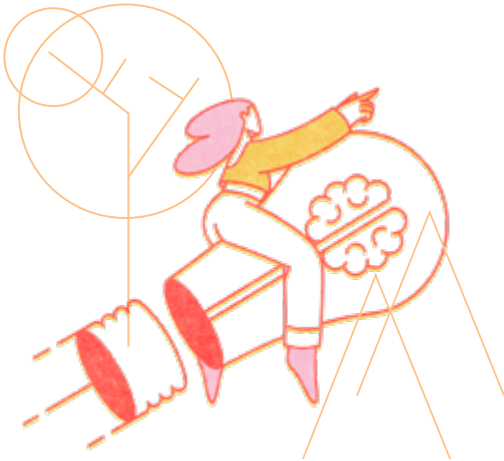
## The key issues facing young people engaging with arts and cultural organisations

- Representation and access
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Neurodiversity, disability, and diverse learning styles
- Global crises and activism
- Skills and training
- Rights and youth voice



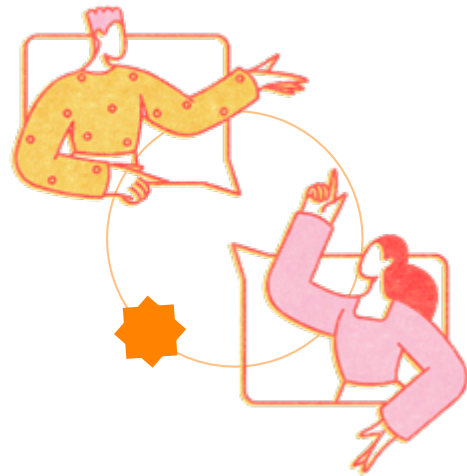
## How effective practice is responding to young people's needs

- Creative practice
- Co-creation and co-design
- Establishing respect and trust
- Flexibility and responsiveness
- Pacing and progression
- Quality artists and practitioners



### Putting young people's rights at the centre of practice

- Process over product
- Setting clear parameters
- Formal and informal participation
- Celebrating and advocating



### Collaboration, networks and the support of funders

- Co-production and collective reflection
- Long-termism
- Network building
- R&D funding
- Conversations not 'forms'
- Comparing the findings with a Cultural Relations Model



### Top priorities for arts organisations

- Sharing practice (UK and international)
- Making connections and exchange (UK and international)
- Youth voice and representation
- Local and Global activism



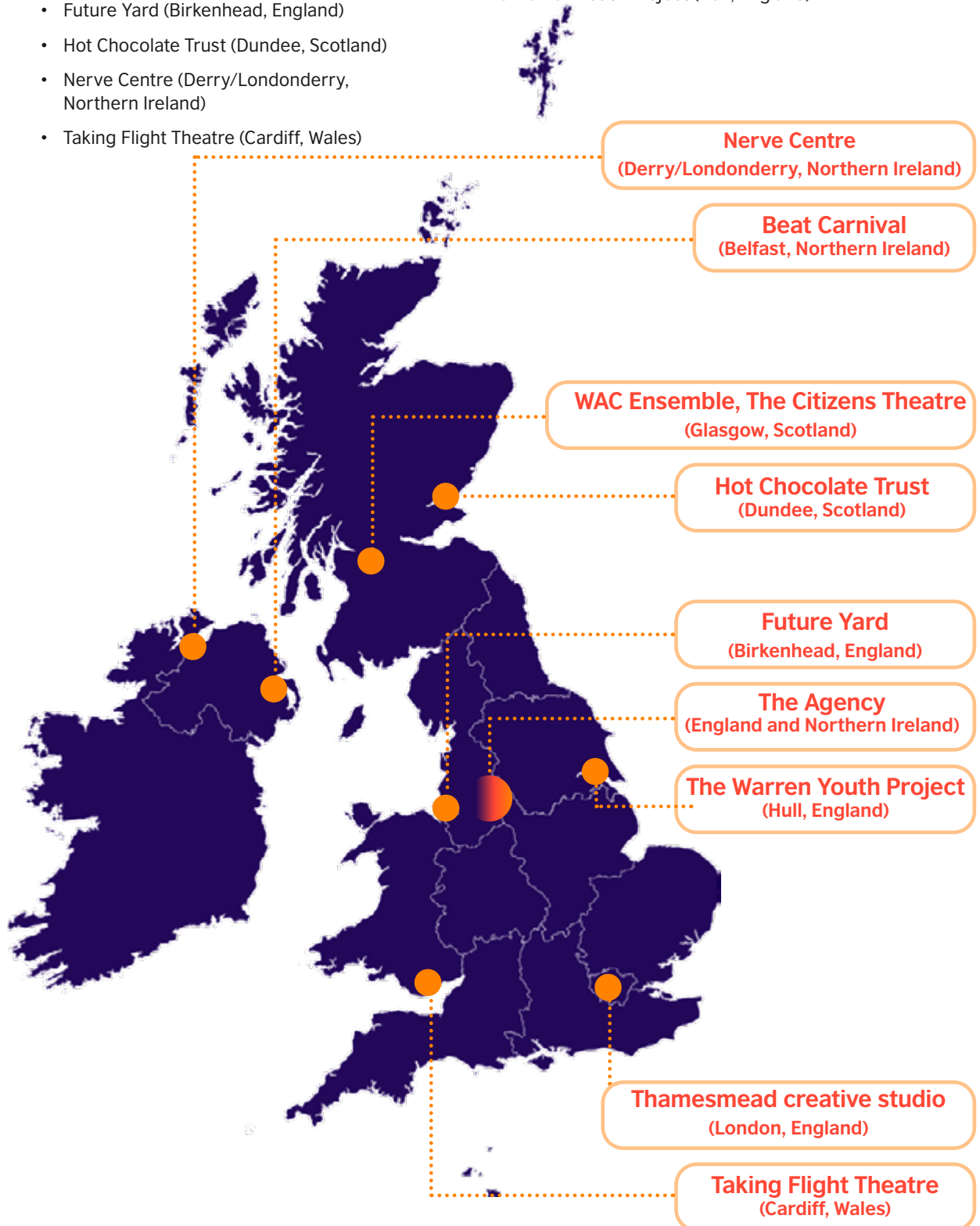
### Overall trends and opportunities for arts and culture for young people in the UK

- Centering young people in policy
- Issues facing young people and funder priorities
- Progression within and across creative fields
- International working

# Case Studies

The nine case studies selected were:

- The Agency (national)
- Beat Carnival (Belfast, Northern Ireland)
- Future Yard (Birkenhead, England)
- Hot Chocolate Trust (Dundee, Scotland)
- Nerve Centre (Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland)
- Taking Flight Theatre (Cardiff, Wales)
- Thamesmead creative studio (London, England)
- WAC Ensemble, The Citizens Theatre (Glasgow, Scotland)
- The Warren Youth Project (Hull, England)



## The key issues facing young people engaging with arts and cultural organisations

Core issues identified by arts organisations working with young people include:

**Representation and access** – There is still work to be done on ensuring that all young people can access provision and see themselves represented in arts and culture.

**Mental health and wellbeing** – The widely reported increase in young people's poor mental health is equally prevalent in the arts and culture sector. A sector that can use methods to potentially support an improve young people's wellbeing.

**Neurodiversity, disability, and diverse learning styles** – While there is a reported improvement in awareness and adaptation to neurodiversity and a broader range of learning styles, there remains a need for the arts and culture sector to adapt and accommodate these consistently.

**Global crises and activism** – The complex and overlapping crises across the world are stressful for young people who can feel powerless in response. Art and culture can support them to process and respond, building a sense of agency.

**Skills and training** – It's recognised that creative subjects have been deprioritised in formal education. Many organisations are working to support young people to develop creative skills as an educational right, as well to prepare the future creative workforce.

**Rights and youth voice** – Research respondents understand that young people can be alienated by the social structures and institutions around them. Many work to enable young people's voices and perspective to be prioritised and at the centre of their provision.

## How effective practice is responding to young people's needs

**Creative practice** – Many organisations are challenging themselves to develop new and interesting ways to support young people. This can focus on developing creativity within a specific artform or enabling creativity more generally across multiple artforms and fields.

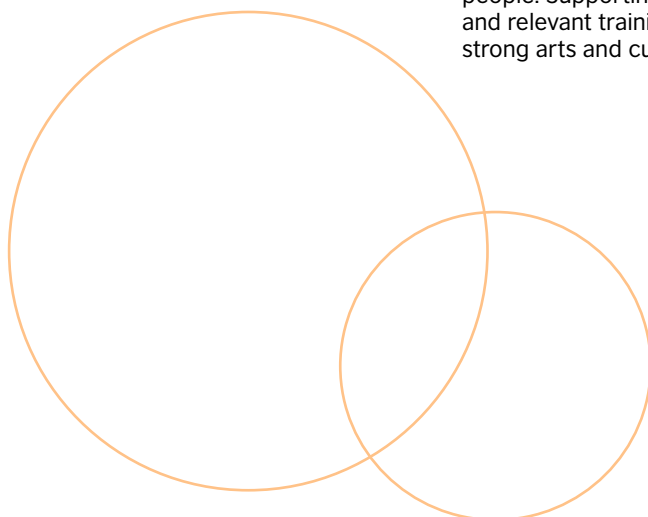
**Co-creation and co-design** – Young people are trusted to make decisions about how practice should be structured. Professionals see themselves as enablers of young people's development journeys more than teachers of how things should be (or be done).

**Establishing respect and trust** – A foundational aspect of practice is respecting young people's perspectives, experiences and ideas. Practice is based on mutual trust, setting boundaries and parameters, and being ok with things being open-ended and process focused.

**Flexibility and responsiveness** – Due to the complex issues that many young people are facing, effective practice needs to be flexible and responsive. This can mean being reflective and changing approaches and plans as activities are underway. It can also mean developing relationships or partnerships to enhance opportunities for young people in real time.

**Pacing and progression** – While there is a need to be open and responsive, effective practice is also about challenging young people to develop in ways that will meet their potential. This is about making sure that practice has appropriate pacing, not over-generalising about people's needs and abilities, and recognising that 'progression' comes in many forms.

**Quality artists and practitioners** – At the core of effective practice is high quality artists and practitioners. In many cases this can include practicing artists who are in the 'real world' and can demonstrate what this looks and feels like for young people. Supporting practitioners to have up to date and relevant training and skills is essential for a strong arts and cultural offer for young people.



## Centring young people's rights in practice

**Process over product** – Practitioners often describe that the developmental *journeys* for young people are more important than the *destinations*. The essence of effective practice is that it is reflective and adaptable, this also means that things won't always work out as planned and learning that emerges is acted upon.

**Setting clear parameters** – Treating young people with respect and developing trust can only be enabled where there are clear parameters about how much agency they have to influence things. Parameters for development are also crucial so that young people can set and meet expectations for themselves.

**Formal and informal participation** – There are a number of models for how young people's participation is enabled in projects and activities, ranging from formal board membership, paid consultation roles, to regular opportunities for reflection on progress. The level of formality in young people's participation is less important than that approaches are intentional and thoughtful.

**Celebrating and advocating** – A core aspect of supporting young people in art and culture is to validate the work they are doing. This can be done through public celebration events, marketing and promoting the work, and providing platforms for young people to talk to each other and the institutions around them. Organisations supporting young people can make the most of their platforms to enhance young people's perspectives in lots of ways.

## Collaboration, networks and the support of funders

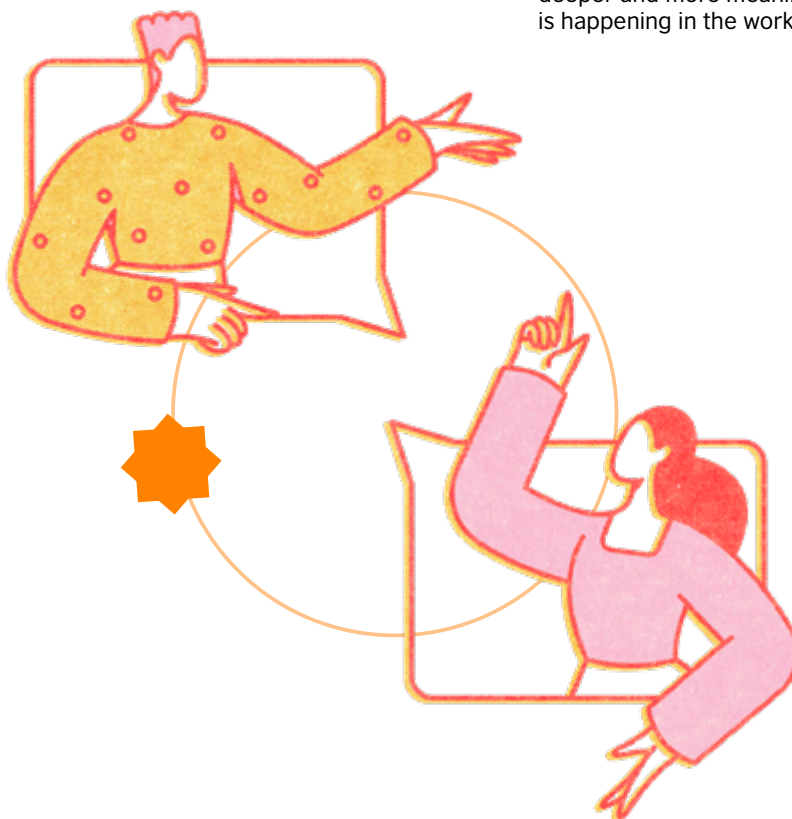
**Co-production and collective reflection** – Organisations highlighted how they see value in co-producing activities with partners (as well as with young people). They also indicated that there should be protected time for collective reflection on what is happening in projects so that practice can be adapted accordingly.

**Long-termism** – Respondents highlighted that there is a need for long-term funding for effective partnerships to be built, as well as building meaningful relationships with communities of young people. The aim for many organisations is for their work with young people to become self-sustaining.

**Network building** – Strong networks and communities of practice are essential to support effective practice with young people. Respondents indicated a commitment to learning from peers and collectively advocating for their work and young people's rights.

**R&D funding** – Funding for research and development was highlighted several times. This would enable more responsive and flexible practice to take place. Action research models (where projects have an enquiry-based approach and can respond to emerging needs and outcomes) was said to be especially effective in working responsively with young people.

**Conversations not 'forms'** – Several respondents indicated that they would like a more conversational approach with those funding their work. In some cases this would support accessibility (e.g., enabling BSL interpretation) and overall would enable organisations and young people to engage in deeper and more meaningful discourse about what is happening in the work.





## Arts organisation priorities

**Sharing practice (UK and international)** – Most organisations indicated that they would like more opportunities to share their practice with peers and funders. This was especially the case across the four nations of the UK, and in international contexts.

**Making connections and exchange (UK and international)** – As with practice sharing, respondents saw clear value in building networks with like-minded professionals across the UK and internationally.

**Youth voice and representation** – The practices described in the research relating to enabling youth voice, participation and representation were especially seen as having value to be shared nationally and internationally, where good practice can be shared and organisations can be informed by models that exist elsewhere.

**Local and Global activism** – Organisations indicated that they see themselves as having a clear facilitating role for supporting young people to be activists, advocating for issues that affect them locally and globally using creative outputs and methods.

## Funder priorities

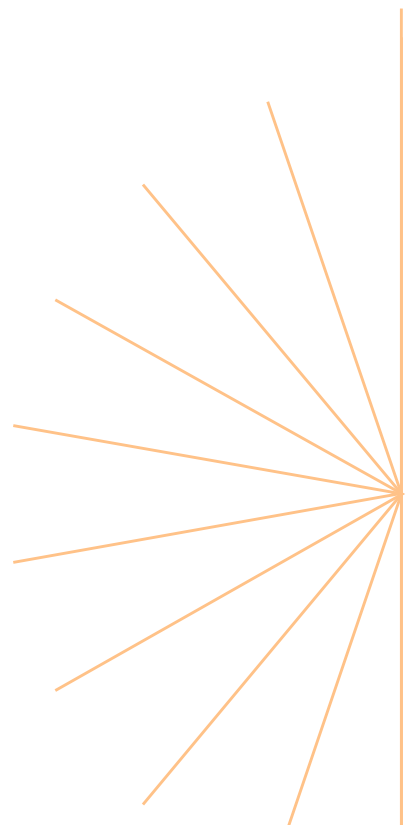
**Nationally specific findings** – The arts councils of the four nations each have different strategies and priorities for supporting young people's participation in arts and culture. These are responsive to broader policy trends and needs in each nation. Across all arts councils, there was a clear aim to enable young people to be more central to developing policies and practices.

### Issues facing young people and funder priorities

– The strategic stakeholders reported many of the same issues as the organisations and young people we spoke to. Poor mental health, the lack of support for creative subjects in formal education, an increased risk of alienation and declining collaboration skills post-pandemic all featured strongly in the discussions.

**Progression within and across fields** – Funders largely support multiple forms and measures of progression, including and beyond formal accreditation. Most indicated that they see a clear overlap between how young people develop personal and social skills and how they develop creatively in arts projects. They saw a clear role for arts organisations to support the next creative workforce and contribute to young people's quality of life in general.

**International working** – Funders did not draw on a huge range of examples of international work with young people, despite mention of a few specific projects. All indicated that they are interested in developing this in their work and would appreciate the opportunity to explore it further with each other and with the British Council.





## Opportunities for the future

### Convening and discussing

It has been raised several times in the research that there is a need for organisations and practitioners to be brought together with funders and policymakers to discuss their mutual needs and aspirations in supporting arts and culture for young people. These could range from more and less formal networks, to seminars, workshops and conferences. There is a recognition that the issues young people are facing have changed significantly in recent years, and a shared sense that there could be a more coordinated effort to exchange knowledge in this area and enable a stronger response.

### Forums for sharing practice

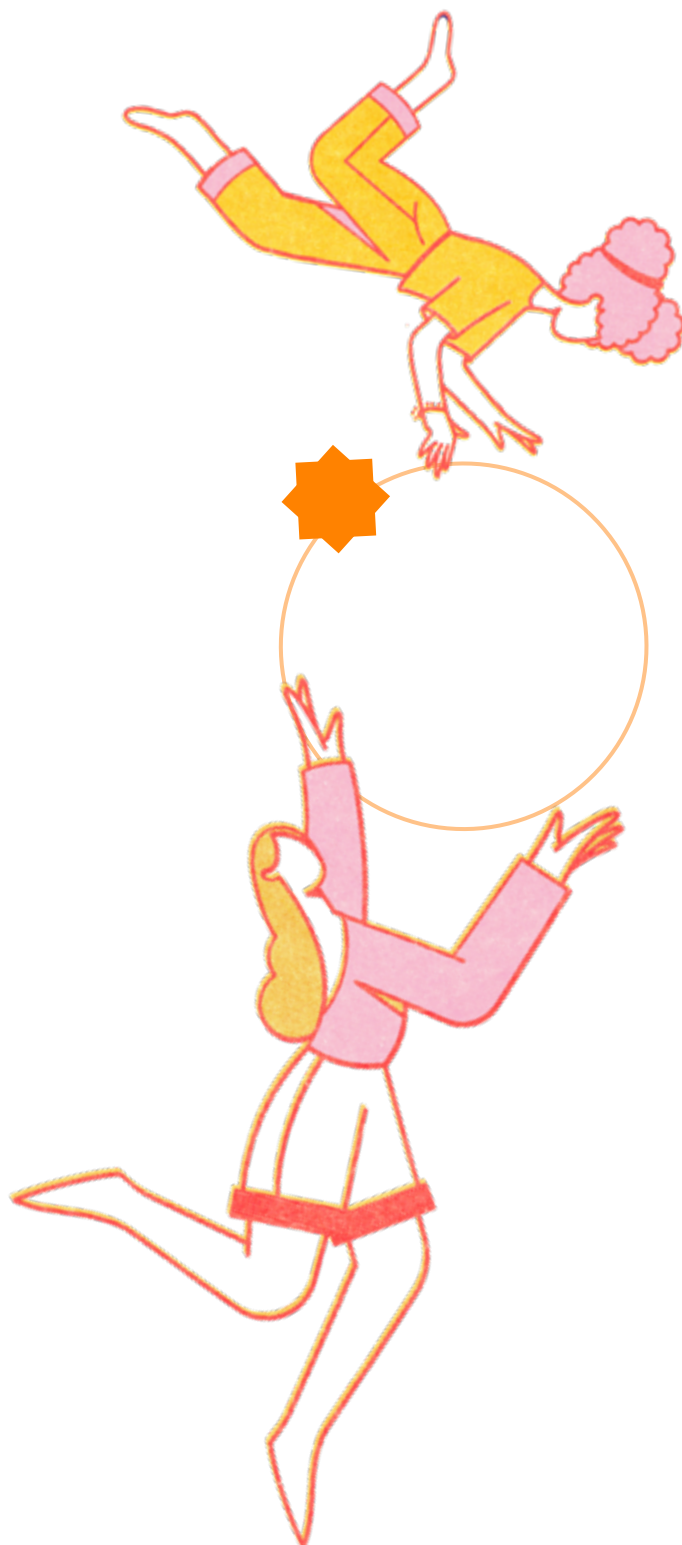
Alongside more policy-focused discussions, there is a need for organisations and practitioners to be supported to come together and share their practice. This research presents a fraction of the innovative practice currently taking place across the UK, and there is a need for strategic bodies to provide further forums for people to share their practice in safe and supportive ways. It was clearly stated that this would be welcomed within and across the four UK nations, as well as with international stakeholders and peers.

### Handing more power to young people

The themes of young people's rights, youth voice, engagement, and participation are threaded through the research. There is a need to clarify language and terminology relating to this practice and bring young people more centrally into the conversation. The opportunities described above relating to convening and sharing practice should be extended to young people themselves with the associated handing over of power to how they may want to set the agenda, and decide what actions and activities are provided in response.

### Celebrating young people's creative lives and future-making

Beyond providing platforms for engagement, there is a huge amount of amazing work being produced by young people across the UK and more could be done to share this more widely. The activist and changemaker spirits of young people described throughout the research show that they have a passion to engage with complex global issues, not just in discourse, but via the broad range of creative activities and expressions they are being enabled to produce. There is arguably a duty to further showcase and celebrate this, recognising the vital role it can play in developing shared human understanding and global cultural relations.



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